The University of Texas at TYLER
The Graduate School

University of Texas at Tyler
Scholar Works at UT Tyler

History Theses

History and Political Science

Fall 8-27-2014

# Isaac Merritt Singer: a womanizer who liberated women

Sharon Hughes

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uttyler.edu/history_grad

 Part of the History Commons

## Recommended Citation

Hughes, Sharon, "Isaac Merritt Singer: a womanizer who liberated women" (2014). *History Theses.* Paper 4.
http://hdl.handle.net/10950/224

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the History and Political Science at Scholar Works at UT Tyler. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholar Works at UT Tyler. For more information, please contact tgullings@uttyler.edu.

The University of Texas at TYLER
The Graduate School

# ISAAC MERRITT SINGER: A WOMANIZER WHO LIBERATED WOMEN

by

SHARON HUGHES

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of History

Marcus Stadelmann, Ph.D., Committee Chair

College of Arts and Sciences

The University of Texas at Tyler
May 2014

The University of Texas at Tyler

Tyler, Texas

This is to certify that the Thesis

ISAAC MERRITT SINGER: A WOMANIZER WHO LIBERATED WOMEN

by

SHARON HUGHES

Has been approved for the thesis requirements

on April 4, 2014

for the Master of Arts degree

APPROVALS:

Thesis Director

Second Reader

Chair, Department of History

Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Abstract

ISAAC MERRITT SINGER: A WOMANIZER WHO LIBERATED WOMEN

SHARON HUGHES

Thesis Chair: Victor Turner, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Tyler
May 2014

Isaac Merritt Singer's life chronicles the rise of a common man who, while lacking wealth, linage, and education, was able to achieve tremendous success and fortune in nineteenth-century America. Singer is the archetypical self-made man or the perfect rags to riches icon. His wealth came from a machine that he skillfully perfected, cleverly marketed, and relentlessly promoted.

Singer's machine made him a very wealthy man and placed him in command of his destiny. In telling the saga of this self-made man, another story is illuminated, that of the women of the nineteenth century. Singer's story is enmeshed with the stories of the women in his life—mothers, wives, mistresses, and the masses of women who stood to benefit from the sewing machine. The machine that Singer marketed had the potential to free women from hours of laborious sewing. It was heralded as liberating woman; however, the women in Singer's life illustrate that nineteenth-century women experienced little liberty and had few opportunities in their lives—they were not captains

of their destinies. Singer lived in the heart of America as it transitioned from the nineteenth into the twentieth century. By tracing his life, this work shows that Singer was a self-made man who was strong, daring, confident, and was always in action. It also shows that the women that were to benefit from Singer's invention had little choice but to be diffident, unassuming, and suffering.

# Introduction

Until fame and fortune came to Isaac Merritt Singer in the middle of nineteenth century, he was just another one of the extraordinary people who made up ordinary life in America. Singer was a person who towns gossiped about, neighbors spread rumors about, and women fell in love with. But almost every town has someone that was the object of gossip, rumor, and love. His story would have been hidden in history, if it had not been for his invention of a time-saving device—the Singer sewing machine. However, because he did achieve celebrity status with his invention, people sought to know more about the man that had forever lightened the woman's burden.

Never being known for his writing skills, it is not surprising that Singer did not keep a journal. Much of how he perceived his early life is gleaned from an interview he granted to the *Atlas* in 1853. At the time of the interview, Singer was forty-two years old and was reminiscing and possibly trying to justify his early days. In addition, he was in the midst of a legal battle and needed to portray himself in a positive light. Newspapers and court proceedings prodigiously chronicled the wealth, fame, and scandal that Singer found later in life. Notably these recordings are steeped with the motive to sell papers, slander the Singer name, and to procure money from the Singer estate. The company that Singer created also recorded his life. The company's motivation for retelling Singer's story was to enhance and endear the Singer name to its customers, thereby increasing the sales of sewing machines. Taken together, these sources help bring to life the story of an extraordinary man who, regardless of how he is perceived, profoundly shaped the world.

Singer was not destined for greatness, but achieved unfathomable wealth and notoriety. He was an immigrant's son, born into a family that was carving out a life in the frontier lands of upstate New York. The War of 1812 was fought on the banks of his homestead, but it was the war that was brewing in his own home that scarred him deeper than any wound inflicted from the battleground.

At a young age, Singer fled his home to live in the fast-growing upstart city of Rochester, New York. In Rochester, Singer was swept into a mass spiritual awakening as well as engulfed in a new and different way of commerce. As a young man, Singer was at the heart of the Industrial Revolution and showed great natural aptitude in mechanical designing. However, it was the theater that revolutionized Singer's life. He pursued acting, but found little success even after a move to New York City, an entertainment epicenter. After many failed acting attempts, he was forced to return to his mechanical skills to eke out a living for his growing family. The production of a working machine that could truly ease the time consuming and tedious burden of hand sewing was by far Singer's greatest achievement. Singer did not invent the sewing machine but he was one of the first to successfully build a machine that actually worked and was practical. Singer became embroiled in legal battles over the numerous sewing machines' patents, but his company emerged to dominate the sewing machine industry.

Due to the success of the machines' design and marketing strategy, Singer became one of the rags to riches icons that dotted the 1850s American landscape. Singer, according to Michael Kimmel, achieved his success entirely from "activities in the public sphere, measured by accumulated wealth and status, and by geographic and

social mobility."[1] Kimmel contends that the rise of the self-made man occurred in America as a result of economic success in the decades following the Revolutionary War and became a desired figure during the nineteenth century.[2] Kira Kogan agrees that a man who came from "unpromising circumstance, who was not born into privilege and wealth, and yet by his own efforts, pulling himself up from his bootstraps, manages to become a great success in life" was firmly established during nineteenth-century America.[3] Kogan claims that Americans embraced the rags to riches stories because it allowed them to believe that everyone was "the captain of their own destiny."[4]

The profits of the invention allowed the Singer family to live amongst New York City's wealthiest. Although America embraced the rags to riches story, wealthy proper society never embraced Singer. He had refused to obey the popular Victorian rules when he was a poor, struggling upstart; and as a rich man, he continued to snub society's demands of morality. In 1860, Singer openly admitted to maintaining multiple affairs and producing over a dozen children—most out of wedlock. As the Civil War was being fought across America, Singer fled to Europe to escape the backlash of his libertine ways. After marrying a very young woman, producing six more children, and building a castle in the English countryside, Singer finally gained some degree of social respectability. In 1875, he died at his English estate, setting off a firestorm of legal battles over his enormous estate. Although Singer's heirs were divided, his company was united and

---

[1] Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* ( New York: The Free Press, 1996), 17.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Kogan, *The Self-Made Man*, 3.

[4] Ibid.

strong. By the turn of the twentieth century, the company employed a sales staff of 60,000 stationed throughout almost every inhabitable portion of the world.[5] In many languages, the name, Singer became a synonym for the sewing machine.[6]

Singer was doubtlessly a gifted mechanic and is credited with liberating women from the burden of hand sewing. Along with cooking, sewing dominated a woman's life; as a result, she was cloistered in the home and bound to her needle work. According to Ellen Carol DuBois and Lynn Dumenil, "the prescriptions for a proper domestic role for women were precise and widely agreed on."[7] Gail Collins summarizes the *Ladies Museum* magazine, "man is strong-woman is beautiful. Man is daring and confident-woman is diffident and unassuming. Man is great in action-woman in suffering."[8]

By observing Singer's life, it becomes apparent that he was a man of action who controlled his destiny. However, the women that deeply influenced his story were subject to social, legal, and economic boundaries that greatly restricted their lives and denied them significant control of their destinies. Singer's motive for creating his machine did not stem from a desire to help women do away with these boundaries and restriction. To the contrary, Singer's words and actions prove that he used and abused the very women his invention was designed to help. Yet for centuries, the Singer machine was held in the highest esteem by women and was credited with liberating them from the drudgery of hand sewing. The womanizing Singer had created a machine that "brought

---

[5] Robert Bruce Davis, *Peacefully Working to Conquer the World: Singer Sewing Machines in Foreign Markets, 1854-1920,* (New York: Arno Press, 1976), viii.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ellen Carol DuBois, and Lynn Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes: An American History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009), 219.

[8] Gail Collins, *American's Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 87.

comfort to the matron and the maiden, saved the busy housewife time, reduced her household burdens, and increased her opportunities for culture."[9] According to one author writing in 1880, "The telegraph and steam-engine live daily in the broad blaze of public view; the sewing machine modestly hides itself away beneath three million of the nine million roofs of America. The [telegraph and steam engine] are [a] public blessing; the sewing machine is a purely domestic one."[10]

[9] *Genius Rewarded or The Story of the Sewing Machine*, (New York: John J Caulon, 1880), 7.

[10] Ibid., 6.

## Chapter One

*Singer's Lineage*

With his very unimpressive linage, Isaac Merritt Singer had the perfect start to becoming a self-made man. He was the last of eight children born to an immigrant, Adam Singer, and his American-born wife, Ruth Benson. Adam Singer arrived in fledgling America during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. At sixteen years old, Adam Singer left his home in Saxony, Germany in hopes of finding a better life in a country that promised abundant land and opportunity. Adam Singer arrived in America at the tail end of the first wave of immigration, 1708-1775. A noted historian of German emigration claims that the early Germans who came to America left "desolation and hunger" behind them, and "with poverty and misery for companions," they crowded on ships that became pest houses and "braved the peril of the ocean for months."[11] During the 1600s and 1700s, Germany, like much of Europe, had been traumatized by years of wars resulting in devastated lands and widespread famine. Saxony, Adam Singer's place of birth was used as "buffer and staging area" throughout the Seven Years' War, 1756-1763.[12] As armies marched across the Saxony landscape, fields were destroyed, livestock

[11] Don Heinich Tolzmann ed., *German Immigration to America: The First Wave* (Maryland: Heritage Books, Inc., 1993), 258.

[12] Steven Ozment, *A Mighty Fortress: A New History of the German People* (Harper-Collins Publishers, 2004), 139.

was stolen, and farmsteads were burned down, leaving Saxony landowners to face harvest failures and deprivation.[13]

German immigrants prior to 1717 had departed Germany to escape radical religious persecution and to pursue utopian experiments.[14] However, those emigrating in the late eighteenth century were mainly represented by a group of people who were troubled by the shortage of viable land and were enticed by active recruitment. New World entrepreneurs seeking low-wage labor and steamship lines seeking more human cargo lured Germans with publications that spoke of the great opportunities in America—promises of land, work, and money. These immigrants were unique; they were risk takers, willing to gamble what little they had in Germany for the possibility of what they could have in America.[15] Between 1720 and 1775, about 108,000 Germans responded to the promises of abundant land, plentiful work, and bountiful money, making German settlers the largest non-British European group of immigrants in America.[16]

What prompted Adam Singer to leave Germany is stated in a 1905 letter from his grandson, "Grandfather Adam was the youngest one of a very large family of brothers in Saxony. Adam, realizing that chances were few for him there, came all alone to New

---

[13] David Blackbour, *The Long Nineteenth Century: A History of Germany, 1780-1918* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 2. http://quod.lib.umich.edu.ezproxy.uttyler.edu:2048/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=acls;idno=heb01947 (accessed March 17, 2013).

[14] Aaron Spencer Rogleman, *Hopeful Journeys: German Immigration, Settlement, and Political Culture in Colonial America, 1771-1775* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 6. http://ehis.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.uttyler.edu:2048/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/nlebk_17249_AN?sid=67308f2c-b3c6-465b-ae64-16a1b3554896@sessionmgr104&vid=1&format=EB (accessed March 5, 2013).

[15] Ibid.

[16] John Frederick Whitehead *et al*., *Souls for Sale: Two German Redemptioners Come to Revolutionary America, the Life Stories of John Frederick Whitehead and Johann Carl Buttner Max Kade German-American Research Institute Series* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 2 ; Rogleman, *Hopeful Journeys*, 4.

York."[17] Adam Singer, being the youngest and aware that inheritance laws favored the eldest son, recognized that his opportunity for farm ownership and economic success was especially bleak in his war torn homeland. Like many Germans, Adam Singer left his family and homeland; he risked everything and sailed alone for America with hopes for a better life.

Approximately half of the Germans that came to America could not pay for their passage; as a result, they exchanged their sailing expenses for years of servitude.[18] According to immigrant shipping contracts the cost of a transatlantic passage for "a man or woman…from the age of fourteen years and older" was thirteen guineas if settled before leaving and fifteen guineas if paid after arriving in America.[19] Since the cost of passage exceeded a year's income for a typical German immigrant, several were forced to borrow the passage fare from the shipper with the promise to repay the debt in servitude.[20] Those who had to borrow their fare were called "redemptioners," for they were of a group of people who used the "redemption" method to pay for their passage.[21] Adam Singer represented the other half of Germans that came to America; he was able to pay for his passage in full, therefore arriving in America not as a redemptioner but as a free man.[22] A relative recalled that Adam Singer, "being unhappy, wanted to immigrate

---

[17] "Portraits of the People," *Atlas*, March 20, 1853, quoted in Ruth Brandon, *Singer and the Sewing Machine: A Capitalist Romance* (New York: Kodansha International, 1977), 5.

[18] Whitehead *et al.*, *Souls for Sale,* 10.

[19] Ibid., 12.

[20] Ibid., 13.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Charles M. Eastley, *The Singer Saga* (Braunton: Merlin Books, Ltd., 1983), 9.

to America, his father agreed, giving him enough money to get there and to settle there."[23]

In 1769, Adam Singer arrived at the harbor of New York; he was alone and lacked knowledge of the English language but was free of redemption debt.[24] His arrival placed him in America just a few years prior to the American Revolution. A little over a century later, the Statue of Liberty welcomed thousands of immigrants like Adam Singer to this same port. However, only Adam Singer could one day claim that the lady of liberty was modeled after his future daughter-in-law, Isabella Eugenia Boyer Summerfield.[25]

Sometime after arriving in America, Adam Singer altered the original family name of Reisinger to Singer in hopes, of sounding less German.[26] In attempts to "strip off old tattered European skin" and exchange it for a good sounding "American Buckskin" name, Adam Singer, like other Germans, changed his family name.[27] In the eighteenth century, it was especially common for German surnames to be changed to

[23] Eastley, *The Singer Saga, 9*.

[24] Ruth Brandon, *Singer and the Sewing Machine: A Capitalist Romance* (New York: Kodansha International, 1977), 8.

[25] Sylvia Kahan, *Music Modern Muse: A Life of Winnaretta Singer Princesse de Polignac* (University of Rochester Press, 2003), 17. Frederic Auguste Bartholdi was the creator of the liberty statue, which was erected in the New York harbor in 1886 to welcome immigrants. The statue was a gift from the people of France to the people of America in celebration of America's hundred years of freedom. Bartholdi did not name the woman he used as a model for the statue, most likely the face was modeled after the sculptor's mother, Charlotte Beysser Bartholdi. However, a rumor circulated that the model was Isabella Eugenia Boyer, the widow of Isaac Singer. She was an excellent choice; she was both beautiful and possessed a strong, uncomplicated silhouette.

[26] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 6.

[27] Whitehead *et al.*, *Souls for Sale*, 34.

near-equivalent English names, Schmidt, Schmied, and Schmitz became Smith; Müller and Möller became Miller; and Braun became Brown.[28]

After landing in America, Adam Singer, in addition to changing his name, set out to find work as a millwright. He found employment on the eastern shore of the Hudson River in an area later named Troy, New York.[29] An American inventor characterized the millwright as a man that, "could handle the axe, hammer, and plane with equal skill and precision; he could turn, bore, or forge....He could calculate the velocities, strength, and power of machines, he could...construct buildings, conduits and water courses."[30] The New Republic's landscape was spotted with grist and lumber mills, which relied on running water for power.[31] And mills relied on the millwright for their construction and maintenance.[32] New York had become the economic center of the colonies, and Troy, with its flowing rivers, was especially suited to provide power for growing industrial mills.[33] An observer of a merchant mill claims, "the high perfection attained by American Millwrights in the construction of machinery for the manufacture of flour, is a source of admiration and pride" and further comments on the "neatness, accuracy, and

[28] Clifford Neal Smith and Anna Piszczan-Czaja Smith, *Encyclopedia of German-American Genealogical Research* (Baltimore: Clifford Neal Smith, 1976), 92.

[29] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 5.

[30] Steven Lubar, *Engines of Change: An Exhibition on the American Industrial Revolution at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1986), 12.

[31] Theodore R. Hazen, "A Mill-Wright Miscellany," Angelfire. http://www.angelfire.com/journal/millrestoration/millwright.html (accessed March 17, 2013).

[32] Ibid.

[33] Thomas F. McIlwraith and Edward K. Muller, eds., *North America: The Historical Geography of a Changing Continent* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), 131.

strength" of a German millwright.[34] Adam Singer must have been mentally and physically skilled to have obtained employment as a millwright. He was working on the technological cutting edge of industry; however, until millwrights unionized in 1851, Adam Singer was considered underpaid and overworked given his "propensity of genius."[35]

After working and living in America for nineteen years, Adam Singer at thirty-five years of age, wed for the first time. In 1788, he married Ruth Benson.[36] The couple and their growing family inhabited several towns in New York. New York was the home to many German immigrants who were described as a frugal, industrious, upright, and honorable people.[37] According to the 1790 United States census, 8.6 percent of the American population claimed to be German, with the highest concentration being in Pennsylvania and New York.[38]

*Singer's Early Life and Family*

Contributing to the growing American population in 1811 was the birth of Isaac Merritt Singer. Singer, Adam Singer and Benson's last child, and the man who in forty years radically changed the world, was born 27 October, in Rensselaer Country, in the

[34] "Mauch Chunk," *Register of Pennsylvania*, July 26, 1828.

[35] "What Trades-Unions Are Good For," *American Socialist*, July 26, 1877.

[36] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 5.

[37] Tolzmann, *German Immigration to America*, 336.

[38] Encyclopedia of Immigration, "German Immigration," http://immigration-online.org/109-german-immigration.html (accessed March 5, 2013).

town of Pittstown or the village of Schaghticoke.[39] Rensselaer Country can legitimately boast that it is the birthplace of Singer; however, the family moved shortly after his birth. The family left the flourishing county with its thirty-six thousand residents, courthouse, hotel, and turnpike that claimed "a good and sufficient road," and travelled one hundred and fifty miles west.[40] They settled in a small town on the shores of Lake Ontario, an area later called Oswego County.[41] What prompted Adam Singer to relocate his family on the eve of the War of 1812 is not known for certain, and why he chose a desolate area that had just recently been the territory of the Iroquois remains a mystery. However, when Adam Singer boarded the ship to America, he had proved that he was willing to take a risk for the opportunity to own land. The price of land on the outskirts of civilization was more affordable than the land in the more urbanized Troy. Adam Singer took the gamble and bought land in an undeveloped and remote area of New York. When Adam Singer moved his family in 1811 to Oswego County he was bringing his family into the American frontier.

[39] John Kobler, "Mr. Singer's Money Machine," *Saturday Evening Post*, July 14, 1951. The author of this article bases his information from a museum found on the forty-seven floor of the Singer Sewing Machine Company headquarters in Manhattan, New York. Kobler claims that Isaac Singer was born 27 October 1811 in Pittstown, a village near Troy, New York. Ruth Brandon, the premier historian of *Singer and the Sewing Machine* states that Isaac Singer was born in Schaghticoke, New York. Schaghticoke refers to the native Indians that lived in a village directly west and north of Pittstown. Both Pittstown and Schaghticoke are in Rensselaer County.

[40] University of Virginia Library, Historical Census, County Level results for Rensselaer County, New York. http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/county.php (March 5, 2013); George Baker Anderson, *Landmarks of Rensselaer County, New York* (Syracuse: D. Mason and Company Publishers, 1897), 78. http://www.archive.org/stream/landmarksofrenss00ande#page/n103/mode/2up (accessed March 17, 2013); Ruth Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 8.

The Singer family purchased land in the township of Granby in Oswego County.[42] Previously, a German merchant from New York City had purchased 500,000 acres of land between Lakes Oneida and Ontario; the land included fourteen towns in Oswego County.[43] The land was surveyed, divided into townships, and subdivided into lots, which were then sold to several parties.[44] Although the land was sold, few people inhabited the area. An Oswego County historian claims that in 1796, only three or four families populated Granby.[45] Twenty-three years later, when one of Isaac Singer's brothers purchased a parcel of land next to the family homestead, the population had still not reached fifteen hundred.[46]

For those who could foresee the future, the subdivided lots in Oswego County held promise. The land was uniquely positioned on the Oswego River, which by way of the Mohawk and Hudson Rivers opened into the Great Lakes. With relatively easy access to the Great Lakes, the people in Oswego County had access to the West. The Native Americans from the West were already accustomed to bringing their beaver pelt laden canoes via the rivers to Oswego for successful trading.[47] The Oswego's water routes soon brought wealth to the new American settlers as well. In just a few decades,

---

[42] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance,* 8.

[43] J. H. French, *Historical & Statistical Gazetteer of New York State* (Syracuse: R. Pearsall Smith, 1860), 519. http://openlibrary.org/books/OL6906793M/Gazetteer_of_the_State_of_New_York (accessed March 5, 2013).

[44] Ibid.

[45] John C. Churchill, *History of Granby, New York From Landmarks of Oswego County* (Syracuse: Mason and Co, 1895). The book appears as an article at http://history.rays-place.com/ny/granby-ny.htm (accessed March 5, 2013).

[46] Brandon *A Capitalist Romance* , 8; Churchill, *History of Granby*.

[47] John W. O'Connor, "A History of the First Fresh Water Port in the United States" (read before the Oswego County Historical Society, Oswego, NY, February 24, 1942), http://oswegohistorian.org/2010/09/the-fur-trading-era-port-of-oswego-ny/ (accessed March 5, 2013).

Oswego became known for its fur, salt, and lumber exports. "Every mule pack, every knapsack, and every vessel sailing out of the Oswego harbor was supplied with salt as a commodity of prime necessity."[48] In 1847, after producing twenty-six vessels, Oswego was celebrated as a shipbuilding center.[49] By 1860, there were fifteen sawmills in operation, and in 1865, Oswego was famous for its lucrative cheese and butter factories.[50]

However, when Adam Singer, his wife, and their eight children arrived in Granby in 1811, they were greeted by a land "timbered with a heavy growth of pine, hemlock, oak, chestnut, beech, maple, and elm, many of the trees being tall and straight."[51] The land was so extremely dense with timber and the soil was so poorly irrigated that it hindered the cutting of roads; consequently, explaining why the first road was not constructed until as late as 1812.[52] The first town meeting was not held until May 1818, several years after the Singer family had taken up residence.[53] At the meeting, a "bounty of $10 for each wolf and $3 for every bear killed in town" was approved.[54] Young Singer observed that the women of Granby devoted a large part of their time to the repairing of clothing, "every article must be made to last as long as is humanly possible, for the prospect of obtaining more is poor indeed. How earnestly the matron longs for the time when they shall have sheep, and geese, and all the adjuncts of civilization."[55] The

---

[48] O'Connor, "First Fresh Water Port."

[49] Ibid.

[50] Churchill, *History of Granby*.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Crisfield Johnson, *History of Oswego County* (Philadelphia: L.H. Evert and Co., 1877), 391; Churchill, *History of Granby*.

[53] Churchill, *History of Granby*.

[54] Ibid.

Singers, like other Oswego County residents were poor pioneers, who, with an axe and an ox-team, carved out a homestead, hewed a log cabin, and literally fought back the beasts of the wilderness.[56]

Shortly after the Singer family made their home in Granby, war was declared between the United States, and the British Empire and their Indian allies. The War of 1812 was initiated by President James Monroe and signified the first time that the United States had declared war on another nation. The thirty-two month military conflict was fought in primarily three theatres: at sea, in the South and Gulf Coast, and on the American-Canadian frontier. Although, Oswego was encompassed in one of the theaters, the Oswego residents did not seem to be adversely affected by the war. A historian writing sixty-three years after the war remarks, "Throughout the war the river teemed with business, to an extent unknown before….Vast amounts of artillery, munitions, and stores were frequently collected at the falls…awaiting transportation."[57] In 1814, a detachment from the United States Navy was stationed at Oswego; their task was to hurry the shipments down the river and to load them aboard small schooners.[58] On the fifth of May 1814, "the thunder of cannons came rolling—up the river, reawakening the fears of invasion and massacre which had been lulled to sleep by two years of safety."[59] Within minutes, the British swarmed into the village commandeering a few small schooners, gathering useful supplies, and burning the forts and barracks. However, in just two days of landing, they unceremoniously departed Oswego. Only one civilian was taken or

---

[55] Johnson, *History of Oswego County*, 58.

[57] Ibid., 391.

[58] Robert Malcomson, "War on Lake Ontario: A Costly Victory at Oswego**,** 1814," *Beaver*, April/May 1995, 4.

[59] Johnson, *History of Oswego County*, 391.

harmed by the British; he had refused to pilot a vessel for the British and received two months of detainment for his defiance.[60] Undoubtedly, young Singer watched as boats floated up and down the river, heard the cannons as they exploded overhead, and knew of the brief invasion. However, even though he lived in one of the war's theaters, he did not even mention the event in his childhood recollections.

Peace was declared on 18 February 1815 and the people of Oswego continued with the cutting of roads, the building of homes, and their hopes of bringing civilization to their frontier lands. Isaac Singer found little to excite his imagination in Oswego and according to the townspeople he was a restless adolescent.[61] Life for a young boy in Oswego was not carefree; children were viewed as a labor source with little time devoted for frivolous fun.[62] They were busy participating in the chopping, plowing, picking, and every other activity necessary to sustain the family. A farmer in a nearby county offered a five-dollar reward for the return of his son who had not simply run away from home but had "left his father's employment."[63]

Although the people of Oswego saw children as a vital workforce, they also shared the conviction that children needed to be educated. The fledgling United States placed a high value on education because they believed that the future success of the country depended on the intelligence and virtue of its people. In the young Republic, Linda K. Kerber states that mothers were entrusted "to educate their children and guide

---

[60] Malcomson, "War on Lake Ontario," 4.

[61] Don Bissell, *The First Conglomerate: 145 Years of the Singer Sewing Machine Company* (Brunswick: Audenreed Press, 1999), 12.

[62] Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865 Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Modern History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 26.

[63] Ibid.

them in the paths of morality and virtue."[64] Kerber reiterates that a woman's most important role was "to encourage in her sons' civic interest and participation," to educate her children—to be a good Republican Mother.[65] By the early years of the nineteenth century, the responsibility of education had begun to shift from the mothers to the shoulders of professional educators. The people of Oswego obviously valued their children's education because, shortly after the Singers arrived in Oswego, the residences collected enough money to build a schoolhouse and to hire a schoolmaster to instruct their children.[66] The school offered Singer and the other Oswego children the basics, probably relying on Noah Webster's "blue-backed" *American Spelling Book*.[67] The school also gave instruction on moral integrity in hopes of raising a generation of virtuous citizens. In the 1853 interview, when questioned about his education, Singer replied, "Schools of that day and in that region were seldom to be found, and consequently the incipient inventor was wholly without the advantages of education, so long as he remained under the paternal roof."[68] Singer publically blames his lack of early education on the absence of available schoolhouses in Oswego. However, Oswego did offer a school. The true reason that Singer did not attend school is possibly found in the

---

[64] Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 283.

[65] Ibid., 283.

[66] Churchill, *History of Granby*.

[67] Noah Webster book was called *The American Spelling Book* but most people called it the "Blue-Backed Speller" because of its blue cover. For the next one hundred years, Webster's book taught children how to read, spell, and pronounce words. It was the most popular American book of its time; by 1837, it had sold 15 million copies, and some 60 million by 1890—reaching the majority of young students in the nation's first century. The book help five generations of Americans secularize their education.

[68] "Portraits of the People," *Atlas*, March 20, 1853, quoted in Ruth Brandon, *Singer and the Sewing Machine: A Capitalist Romance* (Kodansha International, 1977), 11.

second part of his statement; "the incipient inventor was wholly without the advantages of education, so long as he remained under the paternal roof."[69] The reason Singer did not participate in the country's pursuit of intelligence and virtue was perchance due more to the upheaval under the paternal roof than the location of the nearest schoolhouse.

In 1821, there is clear evidence of why life under the paternal roof was troubling to the ten-year-old Isaac Singer. Singer's mother had divorced his father, left the family, and lost contact with her children.[70] Divorces were rare but not completely unheard of in the new Republic.[71] In 1890, two couples in every one thousand were divorced in the state of New York.[72] The primary reason why it was difficult for women to divorce their husbands in the early Republic was that "a woman's identity became submerged, or covered, by that of her husband when she married."[73] Coverture, the act of being covered, was a legal doctrine whereby, upon marriage, a woman's legal rights were included in those of her husband—she became civilly dead. Another factor that discouraged women from divorcing their mates was that the children of the marriage fell under the coverture law and were legally bound to the father. If a woman was granted a divorce, she would gain her freedom, but in turn lose her children.

---

[69] "Portraits of the People."

[70] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance* , 9.

[71] Ilyon Woo, *The Great Divorce: A Nineteenth-Century Mother's Extraordinary Fight against Her Husband, the Shakers, and Her Times* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2010). Woo examines the divorce case of a young mother, Eunice Chapman, who captivated the upstate New York headlines in 1814. It took five years of aggressive campaigning, letter writing, and activism for Chapman to reclaim her children and regain her civil identity after divorcing her husband.

[72] U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, *100 Years of Marriage and Divorce Statistics United States, 1867-1967*, DHEW Publication Number (HRA) 74-1902, data from the National Vital Statistic System, Series 21, Number 24, 9 and 34.

[73] Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 121.

New York matrimonial law stated that a divorce could be permitted only for reasons of adultery. Women who were abandoned, beaten, or neglected could not lawfully file for divorce.[74] It was recorded that "Ruth Singer escaped from a dismal household by procuring a divorce, a dramatic expedient in that time and place."[75] The personal strength and determination necessary to pursue a divorce during this era possibly is found in Benson's Quaker roots. Quaker women in the early nineteenth century were independent, self-reliant, and did not defer to their husbands; they considered themselves equal with their men in the management of all society's business. Strong Quaker women were especially active in the brewing fight against slavery and the battle for women's rights. Regardless of Benson's fortitude, she was caught in an awful predicament; if she petitioned for a divorce-from her philandering husband, she forfeited custody of her children due to the laws of coverture.

Life in the Singer household must have been intolerable for Benson to seek a divorce knowing that she jeopardized losing contact with her children; however, in 1821, Benson sought and was granted a divorce.[76] Afterwards, Benson returned to her parents' home in a Quaker settlement in Albany, New York never to see her youngest son again.[77] Years later, a ninety-nine year old Adam Singer was claimed to have looked for his former wife, but he was too late. She had died the year before. What the divorcee wanted

[74] In 1812, the year Ruth Benson was awarded a divorce, New York matrimonial law stated that a divorce could be granted only for reasons of adultery. In 1813, legislature rejected desertion as grounds for divorce, and in 1827, it rejected a recommendation that habitual drunkenness be a legitimate reason for divorce. A famous case in 1922 resulted in the "Enoch Arden" act which authorized a divorce for a woman who had not been heard from her spouse for five years. In 1966, New York law legalize a no fault divorce.

[75] Kobler, "Mr. Singer's Money Machine."

[76] Ruth Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 9.

[77] Bissell, *The First Conglomerate*, 12.

to say to his former wife after forty years of separation will never be known. What can be assumed is that the Singer household was not a pleasant home to grow-up in, and Singer's later calamitous romantic relationships can possibly be traced to the loss of a mother at a young age. Psychological research claims that a child's relationship with his mother provides a foundation for trust in all future attachments.[78] Children deprived of early and healthy dependency may later suffer an attachment disorder which is characterized by a general failure in social relationships—for the rest of Singer's life his social relationships would be plagued by his inability to positively attach to another person.[79]

Singer did not build an attachment to his stepmother, who married his father within two years of his mother leaving. Isaac Singer left his family and home shortly after his stepmother's arrival indicating that they did not have a close relationship. The twelve-year-old, restless Singer bade farewell to his family and the frontier town of Oswego for a new life in the bustling city of Rochester, New York.[80]

*Erie Canal, School, Religion, Trade, and the Theater*

Rochester was approximately seventy-five miles southwest of Oswego. It was a farming town situated on the Genesee River, and it had recently been declared the fastest growing community in the United States.[81] When Isaac Singer arrived in Rochester in

[78] Daniel F. Shreeve, *Reactive Attachment Disorder: A Case Based Approach* (Springer, New York: Springer Science and Business Media, LLC, 2012), back cover.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Bissell, *The First Conglomerate,* 12.

[81] Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 16.

1823, the portion of the Erie Canal that linked Rochester to New York City had just been christened. It would take two more years for the canal to reach its final destination in Buffalo. The canal provided an economical mode of transportation for both goods and people between the inland country of New York and the cities of the Eastern Seaboard.

When Singer arrived on the outskirts of Rochester he saw endless miles of wheat fields, and along the river, he saw five-story stone mills turning the wheat from those fields into flour. After the grinding process, the mills poured the flour into barrels to be transported by the Erie Canal to the New York City market. By 1830, Rochester was producing a half-million barrels of flour annually, making it the largest flour-producing city in the United States—earning the title of the "flour city."[82]

In Rochester, Singer witnessed a new type of commerce. No longer were town and country separate worlds; the Erie Canal had forever connected them. The local farmers brought their wheat to the mills and, in turn, were paid in cash. The flour sailed to the city and the farmers' cash was used to purchase goods. Rochester offered a plethora of opportunities for the farmers to spend their money. The city's sixty-five workshops manufactured guns, nails, shoes, hats, woolen cloth, wagons, furniture, and even luxury items such as jewelry and mirrors.[83] Singer left behind an existence in Oswego where his family struggled to make every item "last as long as is humanly possible for the prospect of obtaining more is poor" to discover a new land that offered the opportunity to earn cash and an abundance of commodities to spend that cash on.[84]

---

[82] Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*, 18.

[83] Ibid., 19.

[84] Johnson, *History of Oswego County*, 58.

The canal's importance can hardly be overestimated, "It welded the whole Northeast into a single economic unit, vaulting it, even in its still-primitive state, into the ranks of the world's largest economies."[85] According to Paul E. Johnson, when Singer stood at the "junction of the Erie Canal and the Genesee River, Rochester, [he] was [at] the most spectacular of the new cities created by the commercialization of agriculture."[86] Rochester had three bookstores, impressive mansions, several grocery stores, a courthouse as well as Episcopal and Presbyterian churches.[87] An 1824 traveler claimed that he could not find an empty bed in one of the city's five hotels—each hotel accommodating up to seventy rooms.[88] Singer had left behind his unhappy family life in the tiny frontier town, where they had fought wild bears in the center of town, to join the occupants of one of the world's greatest emerging cities. Singer took on this new challenge with confidence, for although he arrived in Rochester "without money, without friends, without education" he did possess "a strong constitution and a prolific brain."[89] Having a strong constitution and prolific brain was imperative, because although Rochester was a spectacular city created by the sweat of the commercialization of agriculture, it was also a "young city, full of thrift and enterprise, and full of sin."[90]

---

[85] Charles R. Morris, *The Dawn of Innovation: The First American Industrial Revolution* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012), 76.

[86] Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*, 16.

[87] Ibid., 15-19.

[88] Blake McKelvey, "Economic States in the Growth of Rochester," *Rochester History* 3, no. 4 (1941): 8.

[89] "Portraits of the People."

[90] Charles G. Finney, *The Memoirs of Rev. Charles G. Finney* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1868), 297.

Likely, Singer lived with one of his elder brothers when he arrived in the busy city. For the next seven years, from ages twelve to nineteen, Singer labored "three-fourths of the year to secure a livelihood," and during the remaining part of the year, he attended a "common school, where he obtained the rudiments of learning."[91] With his mother gone, a dubious stepmother, and a philandering father who "neglected his young son, raising him godless and without guidance," it is not surprising that Singer did not receive an education during his early years in Oswego.[92] However, after arriving in Rochester, Singer actively pursued a formal education from one of the city's common schools. Education was voluntary, and although Singer was only twelve years old, he was not required to attend school. However, in the 1820s there was an optimistic spirit that encouraged youngsters like Singer to attend school. According to a fifteen-year-old boy of the time, "Every boy knew that there was nothing to hinder him from being President; all he had to do was to learn."[93] Education was the gateway to success in the new nation. Horace Mann, the Father of the Common School, argued, "Education should serve as a means of social mobility. Education should provide new opportunities to a class of people who otherwise would be confined to low-status labor."[94] Schools were also needed to achieve the Jeffersonian republic principles; they helped turn Americans,

[91] "Portraits of the People."

[92] Bissell, *The First Conglomerate*, 12.

[93] "A Portrait of America, 1830," EyeWitness to History, (2008), www.eyewitnesstohistory.com (accessed March 13, 2013). Thomas Low Nichols recalls the spirit of optimism he felt as a fifteen-year-old boy in New England during the 1830s. Nichols grew up to be a journalist and prolific writer. This account is taken from his 1864 book, *Forty Years of American Life.*

[94] Leslie E. Laud, "Moral Education in America:1600s-1800s,"*Journal of Education* 179, Issue 2 (1997): 4.

regardless of creed, class, or backgrounds into patriotic and law-abiding citizens.[95] In the 1820s and 1830s, the desire for common or public schools gained momentum as political leaders looked to education, not just through the informal independent colonial schoolhouse, like the one built in Oswego, but through schools organized and financed by the states.[96] Mann also proclaimed that political stability and social harmony depended on universal education.[97] In a common school, American children, including young Singer, learned the fundamentals of reading, writing, and calculation, in so much as they could read the Bible, an almanac, and understand a property deed or an account. In his 1853 interview, Singer reflected on his education in Rochester telling the reporter whenever "any book, dealing with mechanics or the arts, came his way; he read it with avidity and attention."[98]

After devoting seven years to receiving a formal education, Singer, at age nineteen, entered into an apprenticeship with a machinist shop.[99] An apprenticeship was a long held and common method of learning a viable trade, and in 1830, a machinist was a cutting-edge career choice. Machinists were those who designed, built, sold, and serviced the new technology that was at the heart of manufacturing.[100] Singer's career choice followed in a similar path as his father. Adam Singer, the millwright, had been

[95] Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The National Experience 1783-1876* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 138.

[96] Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 5; Jack Larkin, *The Reshaping of Everyday Life 1790-1840* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1988), 34.

[97] Cremin, *American Education*, 137.

[98] "Portraits of the People."

[99] Kobler, "Mr. Singer's Money Machine."

adept and skilled in the construction and workings of the mills. Both father and son had an aptitude for understanding how mechanical things operated. When Adam Singer came to America, he was engulfed in the First Industrial Revolution, a period of time when work changed from an agrarian, handicraft economy, to one dominated by industry and machine manufacture. Isaac Singer, witnessed the First Industrial Revolution evolve into the Second Industrial Revolution, a period of time when an emphasis was placed on technological and economic progress. Economic wealth was coming to those who could invent a machine to do work that was traditionally performed by hand. Employment opportunities were readily available for those who could build the machines and keep them functioning. Machinists were at the heart of the Second Industrial Revolution because they kept the cotton gin, the circular saw, the flying shuttle, the Spinning Jenny, along with countless other new inventions, operational.

Singer was a typical 1830's machinist apprentice; he was male, young, unmarried, and lived in the master artisan's house earning a small allowance. Usually it took seven years of working and living with the master before the apprentice completed their contract and were deemed to have learned their craft.[101] During this time the master became a type of father figure in the boy's life.[102] According to Singer, he left his apprenticeship after only four months; he was "so far a skillful artisan that few would have supposed he had not served a full apprenticeship in the trade."[103] Possibly Singer was so amazingly talented that he achieved in four months what it took others seven

[101] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 83.

[102] McKelvey, "Growth of Rochester," 8.; Larkin, *Reshaping of Everyday Life*, 45.

[103] "Portraits of the People."

years. However, his claims of being such a skillful artisan came over twenty years after the event, and may indicate an attempt to defend his negligence for not finishing his apprenticeship.

In addition to an education and a trade, Rochester offered Singer religion and social reform. Beginning roughly in 1790, America began to experience a spiritual awakening, later to be labeled the Second Great Awakening, which concluded in approximately 1840. Protestants were the driving force behind the Second Great Awakening. In preparation for the second coming of Christ, they focused on bringing the unchurched into the fold and eradicating the evils of society. The movement produced a tremendous energy, which resulted in radical changes in moral attitudes as well as benevolence and service to humankind.[104] In the early nineteenth century, western New York was coined the "Burned-over District" by evangelist Charles Grandison Finney, because the area had been subjected to habitual religious revivalism.[105] Owing to the continual early Methodist circuit riders seeking lost souls, Finney believed that the New York residents were spiritually hardened or dead to the religious message—their hearts, much like forests destroyed by fire, were burned-over.[106] However, after conducting six months of revivals in Rochester, Finney claimed that the countryside was not dead, but ripe for the harvesting and reforming of souls. Finney's autobiography states that many people were plagued with agonizing souls, but "as the revival swept through the town" it converted great masses of people, and the change "in order, sobriety, and morality of the

[104] John W. Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America* (United Kingdom: University of Cambridge, 2003), 27.

[105] Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950), 3.

[106] Ibid.

city was wonderful."[107] Finney's message united the different Christian denominations to wage war on alcohol, the circus, the theater, and other workingmen's entertainment that were evil because they "wasted men's time and clouded his mind."[108] All of Rochester, young and old, was targeted for revival; Finney recalls that the Rochester High School attended the religious services and many became deeply anxious about their souls; a later report claims that nearly every person in the school was converted.[109] Women in particular led the campaign to circulate Bibles, to establish Sunday schools, to encourage temperance, and to enforce Sabbath observance.[110] The Second Great Awakening, according to Finney, reached its zenith in the burned-over district; with over one hundred thousand people being affected.[111]

Singer was living in the midst of the burned-over district and undoubtedly received invitations to revivals, heard men preach from the street corners, and was given a Bible by the women of the town. His early life in Oswego had not provided a foundation in any particular religion. The Quaker doctrine that his mother conveyed to him did not take root during the ten years they lived together. The original family name, Reisinger, and the revised name Singer had Jewish origins. Singer's father and grandfather were indeed Jewish; however, his grandmother was Protestant and had reared

---

[107] Finney, *Memoirs of Rev. Finney*, 297-298.

[108] Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*, 95 and 115.

[109] Finney, *Memoirs of Rev. Finney*, 292.

[110] Cross, *The Burned-over District*, 126, 177, and 237; Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 129.

[111] Finney, *Memoirs of Rev. Finney*, 301. Finney reports that Lyman Beecher claimed that over one hundred thousand people were connected with the church as a result of the revivals; Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*, 4-5.

her children with Protestant convictions.[112] Isaac Singer's father had opted to "raise him godless--ascribing to neither Jewish nor Christian beliefs."[113] When Singer arrived in Rochester, he did not appear to have any deep religious convictions. It is possible that he was intrigued, inspired, or even transformed by the Second Awakening's message of salvation. He might have been one of the students who was anxious about his soul and converted during Finney's speech. It is highly improbable that Singer completely dodged the burned-over district's revivals and its message of salvation. Whitney Cross observes, "wave upon wave of seasonal enthusiasm swept the Yankee hill country…the lad who emigrated from these neighborhoods could hardly have escaped at least one such revival."[114] The impact of the Second Great Awakening's revivals on Singer can never be truly known—maybe the seeds of salvation so zealously planted in his early life did not take root until later or maybe not at all.

Singer's salvation status is unknown, but one platform from the revivals visibly influenced Singer's life—the preaching on temperance. In addition to salvation, the revivals with the help of organizations, such as The American Temperance Society, sought social reform. One vice they especially targeted was drinking. Drunkenness was closely associated with other socially unacceptable behaviors such as wife-beating, murders, lewd behavior, abandonment of families, sexual promiscuity, indebtedness, idleness, and chronic unemployment.[115] In hopes of avoiding these abhorred behaviors, Lyman Beecher, a preacher, called the Rochester inhabitants to abstain from whiskey and

[112] Eastley, *The Singer Saga*, 9; Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 6.

[113] Bissell, *The First Conglomerate*, 12.

[114] Cross, *The Burned-over District*, 7.

[115] Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance*, 25.

other ardent beverages.[116] In the early nineteenth century, the average citizen could not afford coffee or tea, and due to concerns about diseases associated with water and milk, they avoided drinking these beverages as well.[117] Wine, beer, and cider were widely consumed, and after 1825, distilled spirits became a plentiful and cheap drink of choice.[118] People were digesting five gallons of distilled spirits a year, leading America to be declared a "nation of drunkards."[119] Activists "published temperance tracts, put on temperance plays, and drove the 'water wagon' through towns encouraging converts to jump on" and swear off the intake of alcohol.[120] They required the signing of a "teetotaler" pledge in hopes of not only ending drunkenness but also to promote moral, respectable, and industrious citizens.[121] Throughout the years, Singer has been labeled with many derogatory terms; however, he has never been publicly accused of being a drunkard or partaking in spirits.[122] If he had signed the pledge, he honored it his entire life; if he hopped on the wagon, he was never recorded as falling off.

Singer gained an education, a trade, and was introduced to religion and social reform in Rochester; however, it was the exposure to the city's theater that most deeply

---

[116] Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance,* 25.

[117] Ibid.

[118] Ibid., 24-25; Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 167.

[119] W.J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 4 and 8; Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance*, 24.

[120] Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 167.

[121] Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic*, 169 and 194; Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance*, 31; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought,* 168. The temperance pledge was circulated throughout the towns, those who placed their name on the pledge were asked to place a "T" next to their name. The "T" indicated that they were willing to pledge to total abstinence; therefore, they were "teetotaler."

[122] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 29. Brandon claims that Singer did not drink; she finds this fact an unexpected and unexplained characteristic in a man who was so intemperate.

altered and henceforth directed Singer's life.[123] In 1824, Rochester saw its first drama, two years later it erected a building whose spacious design was intended to lure performances from travelling theater troupes and the circuses.[124] Travelling shows had to offer a very broad appeal; an American actor wrote, "I danced on stage, I was Harlequin in the pantomimes, occasionally I sung a comic song, I tumbled on the slack rope…I introduced mechanical exhibitions in machinery…I was performer, machinist, painter, designer, music compiler, the bill maker, and treasurer."[125] The Barnard and Page Circus came to Rochester and was noted for its clown's tightrope performance and the pony's retrieving act.[126] The local newspaper noted that the circus was sensitive of the women, forbidding them entrance without a male escort. It also claimed that their clowns were not of the low degree, and that there was nothing objectionable, immoral, coarse, or vulgar about the performance.[127] Although nothing about the show seemed derogative, attendance to the circus as well as the theater was lack-luster in Rochester. The reform efforts and the death of the famous daredevil, Sam Patch, had deeply influenced the down spiraling profits of the arts. Patch, an exhibitionist, had hurled himself off a 125 foot cliff into the Genesee River with thousands of spectators watching as he attempted to cheat death.[128] The clergy of Rochester later scolded the spectators for encouraging Patch's

[123] Kobler, "Mr. Singer's Money Machine,"

[124] Blake McKelvey, "The Theater in Rochester during Its First Nine Decades," *Rochester History* 16, no.3 (July 1954): 2.

[125] Robert M. Lewis, ed., *From Traveling Show to Vaudeville: Theatrical Spectacle in America, 1830-1910* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003), 6.

[126] Ruth Rosenberg-Naparsteck, "A History of the Circus in Rochester," *Rochester History* 49, no.3 (July 1987): 18.

[127] Ibid, 5-6.

[128] Paul E. Johnson, *Sam Patch, The Famous Jumper* (Hill and Wang, 2004).

suicide and their guilt had the effect of keeping them from attending future foolhardy performances.[129] Travelling groups soon avoided Rochester because it was not an "amusement town; it would not bring in enough receipts to pay for the expenses."[130] Before the social reformists eliminated the travelling entertainment, Singer was captivated by the comic songs, enchanted by the circus clowns, and spellbound by Patch, but most of all he was awestruck by the theater. [131]

Likely, Singer was in the crowd as the Charlestown Players entertained the Rochester inhabitants with their rendition of Shakespeare.[132] Singer soon became passionate about the theater; he "seized every opportunity for work around the theater, however lowly—ticket taker, scene shifter, prop man—turning to his lathe only as a last resort."[133] Singer's newfound desire for acting might provide a better explanation of why he left his apprenticeship after only a few months. Possibly, it was not his superior skill that made him leave his apprenticeship, but his newfound love of the theater. Eventually, he won small parts and then, based on a recital of a long passage from Shakespeare, Singer secured the leading role in Shakespeare's *Richard III*.[134] Singer made an impressive Richard, his presence was commanding; he had reddish hair, a resounding voice, and at six feet four inches, stood almost a foot taller than the average male of the

[129] Rosenberg-Naparsteck, "Circus in Rochester," 3.

[130] Ibid., 5.

[131] Kobler, "Mr. Singer's Money Machine."

[132] McKelvey, "The Theater in Rochester, " 2.

[133] Kobler, "Mr. Singer's Money Machine."

[134] Ibid.

day.[135] Singer was described as "herculean in build, with a mane of auburn hair and a massive brow and jaw, he radiated vigor."[136] While reminiscing, Singer claimed to have been "one of the best Richards of his day."[137] His portrayal of the homicidal king was applauded in his home town of Rochester; however, when the show went on to other towns, the reviews turned to "crude and bombastic."[138] The Torbay Civic Society asserts that Singer, "developed an overwhelming passion for the theater, and he went barn-storming across America…but as an actor he seems to have had more enthusiasm than talent."[139]

*Singer Marries Wife Number One and Moves to New York City*

While pursuing his life as a thespian, the nineteen-year-old Singer met and married his first wife, fifteen-year-old Catherine Maria Haley in Palmyra, New York.[140] The bustling city of Palmyra was about thirty miles east of Rochester and was conveniently connected to Rochester by the Erie Canal. The local Justice of the Peace performed the December 1830 ceremony in the Haley's home amongst their family and

[135] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 18; Kobler, "Mr. Singer's Money Machine." ; Eh Net Encyclopedia,"A History of the Standard of Living in the United States," Time Trends in Average Height, chart 3, Economic History Service http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/steckel.standard.living.us (accessed March 17, 2013). According to chart 3 the average American male in 1830 was 5 foot 6 inches.

[136] Kobler, "Mr. Singer's Money Machine."

[137] "Portraits of the People."

[138] Kobler, "Mr. Singer's Money Machine."

[139] Frank Cawson ed., *Oldway Mansion and The Singer Family* (Torbay, England: Torbay Civic Society, 1988).

[140] Eastley, *The Singer Saga*, 9; Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance,* 9.

neighbors. None of Singer's family is recorded attending the nuptials.[141] For a short time after the wedding, the newlyweds lived with the bride's family. The town recalls two noteworthy citizens, Henry Wells and Joseph Smith, both of whom lived in the Palmyra region at the same time as the Singers. Wells later gained fame as one of the earliest express companies, as well as being the founder of Wells College, originally an all-women's institution.[142] Smith, according to a Palmyra women's society, was interested in "things occult" and with his "magic stone" claimed to have located "buried treasure and to forecast the future."[143] Within a year of the Singers' 1830 wedding date, Smith and his followers "of some thirty members drawn from Palmyra and neighboring communities" opted to move west with plans to build a communalistic American Zion.[144] Although Smith moved on, Palmyra was heralded as the birthplace of the Mormon Bible and of the Latter Day Saints.

In Singer's nineteen years, he had first-hand experience with a number of religions. He was aware of his father's Jewish faith, as well as the beliefs of the Quakers. After leaving his Oswego home, Singer gained direct knowledge of Protestantism during the Rochester revivals, and in his time in Palmyra he learned about Mormonism. Although exposed to different religions, none seemed to resonate with Singer during his early years. He was never recorded attending church, ascribing to a faith, or professing a religion until much later in life.

---

[141] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 20.

[142] The Woman's Society of the Western Presbyterian Church Papers, *Palmyra Wayne County, New York* (Rochester: The Herald Press, 1907), 26.

[143] Ibid., 28 and 29.

[144] Ibid., 29.

By 1835, the Singers had moved out of the Haley's home and relocated to the nearby village of Port Gibson where the couple welcomed the birth of their first child, William A. Singer.[145] Isaac Singer also procured a job in a Port Gibson dry goods store; however, he proved not to be a steady employee.[146] According to Catherine Singer's brother, Singer spent most of his time giving performances. Singer "was rarely home, but traveled about the county taking whatever jobs he could find connected with the theater."[147]

By 1836, Singer had moved Catherine Singer and their toddler son to New York City, possibly to look for employment. The Singers were not the only family that moved away from the country towns to the big city in the first half of the nineteenth century. People responded to the "pull" of the cities while others felt a "push" to leave the farm. Some Americans looked to the big cities "to escape the painful thrift and drudgery of a small farm" and "to improve their standard of living."[148] Many found city jobs less arduous than the physical labor of country life.[149] With improvements in agricultural productivity, fewer workers were needed in the rural communities; in addition, more children were surviving into adulthood resulting in a surplus in the available workforce.[150] Singer might have especially been "pulled" to New York City because he wanted to be closer to the epicenter of theatrical activity. Singer might also have felt

[145] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 20.

[146] Ibid.

[147] Ibid.

[148] Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 525-526.

[149] Ibid., 531.

[150] Ibid., 526.

"pushed" out of Port Gibson, not because of farm life drudgery, but due to the negative rumors circulating about his antics.[151] A newspaper claimed that Singer was known for "his intimacy with the female part of the population" and friends and family expressed "much sympathy for his wife."[152] A move away from home and family was undoubtedly difficult for a young mother; however, it is conceivable that Catherine Singer eagerly joined her husband in the move to New York City to avoid the embarrassment from the town's gossips.

Although Rochester and Palmyra were considered civilized and well-populated, they were puny in comparison to New York City with its "40 large hotels, 19 banks, 135 churches, and 26 daily newspapers."[153] The city was the "greatest commercial emporium of the world," but it was also filthy—wild hogs wandered the streets, the water supply was polluted with industrial waste, and disease spread at epidemic proportions.[154] The city had experienced severe food shortages, rising inflation, and heightened unemployment as a result of the Great Fire of 1835, which had blazed just a year prior to Singer's arrival.[155] Because of the fire, "banks suspended operations, insurance companies were unable to pay off claims, businesses were unable to rebuild, and great numbers of people were thrown out of work."[156] With increasing stabbings, muggings, dognapping, purse snatching, and pickpocketing, New York City had become the most

---

[152] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 21.

[153] Mary L. Knapp, *An Old Merchant's House: Life at Home in New York City 1835-1865* (New York: Girandole Books, 2012), 12.

[154] Ibid., ix-x and 12.

[155] Luc Sante, *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Life Old New York* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005), 344.

[156] Ibid.

crime–ridden and dangerous cities in all of Christendom.[157] Walt Whitman warned the country bumpkin of the dangers of the big cities, "there are hundreds—thousands—of infernal rascals among our floating population who will sneak up behind you...knock you on the head, and rob you before you can even cry out."[158] Whether it was for employment opportunities, pursuit of the theater, or to escape gossip, the decision to relocate his young family to dirty, depressed, and dangerous New York City brings into question Singer's concern for his family's welfare.

Although New York City was filthy, economically stunted, and unsafe, it still lured large numbers of young men and women. They left the surveillance of their families, their churches, their masters, and their towns to experience life in New York City. With familial and communal restraints removed, there was deep concern about how men and women would conduct themselves when faced with the temptations of the city. As a result, flurries of manuals were produced in the 1830s offering advice on "manners, morals, personal appearance, mental development, and work habits."[159] When addressing how men should approach business, *The Young Man's Guide* recommends that men should rise early, be loyal to their employer, have one principal object of pursuit and steadily pursue it.[160] The guide admonished men that belittled women, "Let us be careful that we do not degrade the (other) sex… by disrespectful language, or actions,

[157] Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance*, 52.

[158] Ibid., 53.

[159] Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 1.

[160] William Alcott, *Young Man's Guide* (Boston: T.R. Marvin, 1838), Chapter 1.

or *thoughts*...Degrade *them*, and we degrade ourselves."[161] The conduct manuals were "aimed at an audience of aspiring men and women who hoped to fulfill the promise of the allegedly open society of Jacksonian America, either by entering the ranks of the middle class from below or by rising within those ranks to higher and higher level of gentility."[162]

Singer was part of the mass exodus of men who left America's countryside, towns, and small cities for the big city; however, he was not one of the aspiring Jacksonian young men who clung to the conduct manuals for guidance. Singer defied the mold set forth by the manuals. As his New York City contemporaries pursued steady employment, Singer worked a multitude of jobs including a lathe-operator, a wood carver, a printer, and a mechanic. Singer's first-born son recalled that his father worked any job during the day including cabinetmaking and mechanic work, but at night, he pursued his acting career.[163] Singer was described by an 1883 newspaper as a "shiftless fellow, capable of turning his hand to any kind of work, but not doing well at anything."[164] It was also said of Singer that "he was given to consorting with other women besides his wife."[165] Singer's actions did not indicate that he was troubled with molding a virtuous character, keeping steady employment, or respecting his wife. What concerned Singer was his acting career.

---

[161] Alcott, *Young Man's Guide*, Section 1 of the Chapter on Social and Moral Improvements.

[162] Halttunen, *Confidence Me* , xv.

[163] Alex I. Askaroff, "A Brief History of a Giant," Sewalot, http://www.sewalot.com/singer_history.htm (accessed December 26, 2013).

[164] "Singer's Widows," *Daily Evening Bulletin*, San Francisco, California, December 28, 1883.

[165] Ibid.

New York City offered myriad opportunities for a thespian. Being fond of Shakespeare, Singer logically aspired to be an actor at the fashionable and respectable Park Theater. This Manhattan theater catered to upper-class society and performed ballets, operas, and acts of Shakespeare.[166] Enjoyment of plays and stage performances was not restricted to the wealthy and educated.[167] The Chatham Garden and Bowery Theater appealed to the working class, featuring entertainment such as animal acts, blackface minstrel shows, and melodramas. For only twenty-five cents, theatergoers could laugh as white actors with their faces painted black sang and danced in mock Shakespearean titles such as "Hamlet the Dainty" and "Julius Sneezer."[168]

Although Singer "gave evidence of being a natural born actor, able to imitate any living thing he had ever heard or seen," he was either not able or willing to be employed in one of the New York City theaters.[169] In the spring of 1836, he opted to leave his family and his current day job at Hoe's press shop, to join a travelling acting troop called the Baltimore Strolling Players.[170]

While working for the Baltimore Strolling Players, Singer was a "stagehand, carpenter, ticket seller, advance agent, and occasionally (at first) acted small parts until

---

[166] Thomas Allston Brown, *A History of the New York Stage from the First Performance in 1732 to 1901, Volume 1* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1902), 11-69.

[167] Jeffery E. Richards, *Drama, Theatre, and Identity in the American New Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1.

[168] Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 73; Rosemarie K. Bank, *Theatre Culture in America, 1825-1860* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[169] "Singer's Widows."

[170] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 21.

his employers went bankrupt."[171] In the 1830s, travelling troupes like the Strolling Players typically performed temperance plays or moral reform melodramas, travelling from one village to another, performing in the town's squares, hauling their own minimal scenery with them, and living a drifter-like existence. The plays often illustrated the riotous life of a wealthy young man, his immoral activities, his ultimate downfall, and finally, the defining moment when he turns from his wicked ways.[172] The actors used costumes and makeup to illustrate the negative effects of drink and depraved living; showed alcoholism as a form of slavery; depicted the drunkard as a "good but weak man;" and relayed how the drunkard's actions hurt innocent women and children.[173] The audiences expected the plays to be hyper-reality; they wanted to be moved emotionally, and dynamically encouraged.[174] The audiences welcomed a dramatic man like Singer who "shouted rather than spoke."[175] Because of the plays, circuses, and exhibitions Singer had witnessed in Rochester and the fact that Singer was himself a teetotaler, he naturally aligned well with the Strolling Players.[176]

*Sponsler, Love of Theater, and the Fate of Catherine Singer*

It was while performing in Baltimore, Maryland that Singer became smitten with a blue eyed and brown hair beauty in the audience. Mary Ann Sponsler was eighteen

[171] Eastley, *The Singer Saga*, 10.

[172] Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance*, 79.

[173] Ibid., 155-156.

[174] Ibid., 79.

[175] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 19.

[176] Ibid.

years old when she first caught sight of Singer on the stage. Like many families on the Eastern Coast, Sponsler's family operated a seafood business specialized in canning oysters.[177] Sponsler impressed Singer with her natural dignity, kindness, and good manners.[178] A budding romance formed between Singer and Sponsler and within a short time Singer asked Sponsler to marry him. Singer returned to New York City and in September of 1836, Sponsler joined him there shortly thereafter. When she went to meet her betrothed, she was not aware that Singer was currently living with his legal wife and child. She claimed that Singer never told her about Catherine and young William Singer. Later Sponsler would assert that Singer "was then a pirate, sailing under false colors…upon the innocent and upon the unprotected, a more valuable treasure could not a pirate capture, than the affection of a young person."[179]

Attesting to his charm, Singer was able to convince Sponsler that his relationship was over with the recently impregnated Catherine Singer. Singer then begged Sponsler to wait for him to legally divorce, so he could rightfully marry her. Sponsler remembered Singer saying, "if you will consent to live with me as my wife, until I shall have obtained the means and become able to get rid of this other woman I will make you my wife; I will marry you."[180] Singer lamented that he did not have the fifty dollars needed to file for a divorce but if Sponsler would wait, he would save the money, divorce his wife, and

[177] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 22.

[178] Ibid., 144.

[179] Surrogate's Court Westchester County, *In the Matter of the Probate of the Last Will and Testament of Isaac M. Singer* (New York, December 28-29, 1875), 5.

[180] *Probate of the Last Will and Testament of Isaac M. Singer*, 6.

marry Sponsler.[181] Sponsler waited almost twenty-four years for Singer to keep his promises; during those long years of waiting, she produced ten children with the married Singer. Singer's legal wife, Catherine Singer, returned to her parents with her two children, leaving Sponsler and Singer to cohabitate as husband and wife in New York City. Although Isaac and Catherine Singer remained married for most of the next quarter of century, they never lived under the same roof again.

As Catherine Singer packed her trunk to return to Palmyra she must have been filled with conflicting emotions. As a woman of 1830s, she was bound by the Cult of True Womanhood to rescue her husband from selfishness and to provide a serene haven for him when he returned home from work.[182] The cult dictated that a woman's role be defined by "kitchen and nursery, overlaid with piety and purity, and crowned with subservience."[183] In other words, Catherine Singer was to strive for four essential virtues: domesticity, submissiveness, purity, and piety.[184] However, how could she achieve these virtues when she had a husband that did not come home because he was living with another woman? Catherine Singer might have left New York City shamed by her failures; however, she might have left on her own accord full of righteous indignation. The moral reforms birthed in the burnt-over district had called on women to unite against the sinners of society. Women were to shun all social contact with men, who they even suspected of having improper behavior –"even if that behavior consisted

[181] *Probate of the Last Will and Testament of Isaac M. Singer*, 6.

[182] Halttunen, *Confidence Men*, 59.

[183] Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 13.

[184] Knapp, *An Old Merchant's House*, 1.

only of reading improper books or singing indelicate songs."[185] The Female Moral Reform society instructed women to not let an immoral man in their house, "do not converse with him, warn others of him, permit not your friends to have fellowship with him, mark him as an evildoer, and stamp him as a villain."[186] Whether Catherine Singer slinked out of town in shame or marched out with righteous vigor, she had to concede that her husband had walked out on her and her two small children. She opted to return to her parents' rural home in Palmyra where she had married Singer six years earlier.

Women, like Catherine Singer, did not have many choices for economic survival when their husbands left them. Employment opportunities for a single mother with small children were bleak. According to a New York historian, women, especially those with children, were the most exploited class in the city.[187] Factory work and domestic employment were closed to her because they catered to young women without young families. It would be another thirty years before the city addressed the need to provide nurseries for working mothers' children.[188] Most women were forced to turn to needle work to eke out a living. "Given-out" or "put-out" work such as sewing the leather uppers to the sole of a shoe had traditionally been a way for women to stay at home and watch their small children yet still produce an income.[189] A delivery wagon brought the cut out pieces to her home for her to stitch; and in turn, he picked up those she had already

---

[185] Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 117.

[186] Ibid.

[187] Edward K. Spann, *The New Metropolis: New York City, 1840-1857* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 72.

[188] Ibid.

[189] Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2003), 30.

done.[190] However, in the 1830s the sub-contracting work had been taken over by farm wives who were willing to work for less than the prevailing rates in the cities.[191] Even if a woman could find put-out work in the city, she invariably faced a life of poverty. The fate of the sewing women had become a national scandal; a woman, who had no one to depend on, lived a life of want and suffering, toiling for a pittance.[192] Catherine Singer surely counted herself fortunate that she was not forced to find work in the city and was able to return to her family in the country.

In 1836, Singer was still legally married to Catherine Singer; however, he and Sponsler rented quarters in one of New York City's boarding houses.[193] Singer called Sponsler, "wife" and although Singer was only seven years older than Sponsler, she called him, "father."[194] Publically, they became known as Mr. and Mrs. Merritt; Merritt being Singer's middle name as well as his stage name. Respectable couples in the Victorian Age, 1837-1907, followed a strict social code of conduct, which dictated sexual restraint—couples did not live together unless they were united in holy matronly. Singer and Sponsler did not follow the Victorian conduct manual's rules on marriage; instead, they simply just pretended to be married. Like many legal and true wives, Sponsler shared years of trials and tribulations with Singer, she bore his children, she nursed him

[190] Catherine Gourley, *Good Girl Work: Factories, Sweatshops, and How Women Changed Their Roles in the American Workforce* (Connecticut: The Millbrook Press, 1999), 19.

[191] Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 30.

[192] Ibid.

[193] Bissell, *The First Conglomerate,* 13.

[194] "Singer's Widows." ; "A Millionaire's Wives," *Atlanta Constitution* Atlanta , Georgia, November 5, 1875.

when he was sick, and she helped him out of financial difficulties.[195] Singer later praised Sponsler claiming, "By the gods! She is a good woman and a faithful wife, and I don't know what I would have done without Ann [Sponsler]."[196] Adding to the legitimacy of their image of a married couple was the birth of their first son. In 1837, Singer welcomed the birth of Isaac Augustus Singer with his so-called "wife," the mistress Sponsler.[197] Earlier in that same year, he had welcomed a daughter, Lillian Singer, with his legal wife; therefore, attesting that he had not been completely faithful to either his legal wife or his pretend wife.[198]

*Illinois, Inventions, and the Merritt Players*

Singer extolled Sponsler, but by 1838, he had deserted her much as he had Catherine Singer two years earlier. Sponsler and her young son returned to her parents' home in Baltimore. Singer most likely left Sponsler as he searched for acting parts in various traveling companies. He must not have been very successful with his pursuit, because within a year he was recorded living in Illinois and working as a day laborer on the Illinois and Michigan Canal. Singer worked alongside a primarily Irish immigrant workforce as they dug the 96-mile canal from Chicago to LaSalle-Peru, Illinois.[199] The canal opened an expansive trade route from the Great Lakes to the Illinois and Mississippi rivers, which flowed into the Gulf of Mexico. It was tough and dangerous

[195] Eastley, *The Singer Saga*, 11.

[196] Ibid.

[197] Ibid., 9.

[198] Ibid.

[199] Jay Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), 42 and 157.

work, and everyone who picked up a shovel assumed the peril associated with the building of canals.[200] For many there really was no choice, working on the canals was better than not working at all.

While observing the hardships of manually drilling and excavating rock, Singer invented his first machine, a machine for drilling rock. The invention consisted of a crank that was turned by tethered horses, forcing a bit to drill a round and true hole into the hard rock.[201] The machine was beneficial in the construction of canals.[202] Singer's drilling machine was awarded one of the 1,061 American patents given in 1839.[203] The number of patents awarded had doubled in just one year, attesting to the innovative spirit of the Second Industrial Revolution. In 1839, Singer sold the patent rights for his machine for 2,000 dollars. This was an enormous amount of money during an era when the annual income for a male manufacturing in urban New England was 323 dollars.[204]

Singer was very elusive in his explanation of how he used the funds from the sale of his carving machine. He claimed he "soon scattered the proceeds with the lavish improvidence which so generally characterizes men of genius."[205] Likely, he squandered the 2,000 dollars to fund his true love—the theater. He sent for Sponsler and their son to join him in Chicago where they formed the Merritt Players, a travelling performing

---

[200] Jay Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), 42 and 157.

[201] United States Trademark and Patent Office, Specification of Letter Patent No. 1,151, dated May 6, 1839. http://pdfpiw.uspto.gov/.piw?docid=00001151&SectionNum=1&IDKey=4DCDF1441E32&HomeUrl=http://patft.uspto.gov/netahtml/PTO/patimg.htm (accessed December 26, 2013).

[203] United States Trademark and Patent Office, Table of Issue Years and Patent Numbers for Selected Document Types Issued Since 1836 http://www.uspto.gov/web/offices/ac/ido/oeip/taf/issuyear.htm (accessed March 31, 2013).

[204] Bissell, *The First Conglomerate,* 13.

[205] "Portraits of the People."

troupe. Sponsler was not an actor but she took acting lessons from Singer and played the female parts in the performances. Her brother came along and helped as a musician and general dramatic assistant; however, he returned home sometime before the troupe disbanded. Singer was the star; he finally had the platform to perform Shakespeare as well as the familiar temperance dramas.[206] For the next five years, 1839-1844, they wandered the county with all of their possessions pulled by a one-horse wagon.[207] They often had to pawn their belongings in order to eat, and slept on the grass because they had no shelter.[208] During this time of constant upheaval and poverty, Sponsler gave birth to three more children, Voulettie Theresa in 1840, John Albert in 1843, and Fannie Elizabeth in 1844. Singer exclaimed, "I am the happiest man in the world, I have boys and girls alternately."[209]

Singer was clearly pleased about the alternating births of his children, but he could not have been satisfied with the financial status of the Merritt Players. According to an Ohio innkeeper's account, the acting profession was not a prosperous trade for the Singers. It was in 1843 or 1844 that the Merritt Players came to perform in the ballroom of Tuttle's Ohio hotel. Tuttle recalls Singer as "poor in pocket, shabby in person, and disposed to be rough and unkind in his manner."[210] He observed that not all of Singer's possessions would have brought ten dollars, and that he had to loan Singer three dollars

---

[206] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 27.

[207] *Daily Evening Bulletin*, December 28, 1883; *The Life of a Sewing-Machine in Ventor* (sic) *Daily Evening Bulletin* San Francisco, California, August 10, 1875.

[208] Ibid.

[209] "Portraits of the People."

[210] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 31.

to help him get to the next town.[211] The Merritt Players started their career in Chicago with a fortune; however, they ended it in Fredericksburg, Ohio penniless. At age thirty-three, Singer found himself in a small town, much like his boyhood town of Oswego, completely destitute with a "welter of debts" and a family to support.[212] Although he longed to be an actor, and had dedicated fourteen years to the stage, he had never been able to command the theater; therefore, in 1844, he was forced to once again turn his lathe to make a living.

Singer's life had started without the advantage of family, education, or wealth, yet he was still able to dictate his future. Singer placed himself in the center of commerce activity, educated himself, and followed his dreams to become an actor. He was not altogether successful in fulfilling his acting dreams, yet he was allowed to follow his desires. When he did not succeed, he had the option of relying on his mechanical genius to sustain him. The women in Singer's life, his mother, his wife, and his mistresses did not have the same options. Their lives were subject to divorce laws that denied them of their children, low wages that left them unable to care for their families, and powerful social axioms that gave them very few choices even when they were the victims of abusive and philandering husbands. Although some women were able to fight the laws, find profitable employment, and endure society's disdain, most were not.

According to Sara Evans, early nineteenth-century men and women clearly occupied separate spheres, which invariably determined their ability to control their

[211] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 31.

[212] Kobler, "Mr. Singer's Money Machine."

destinies.[213] Singer's life aligns with Evans's claims that men controlled their futures by operating in the public work sphere where they sought political and economic order, dominance, and financial success.[214] The women that surrounded Singer were confined to the private home sphere where they attempted to perfect being submissive, domestic, raising their children, and experiencing little control of their destinies.

[213] Sara Evans, *Born for Liberty* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 68.

[214] Ibid., 69.

## Chapter Two

### *Back to the Lathe to Make a Living*

In 1844, Singer retired from his pursuit of acting, and found work in a Fredericksburg sawmill manufacturing wooden printers' type, which was used in the printing of newspapers, posters, and advertisements.[215] Just as Singer had done in Illinois with the excavating machine, he created a machine that improved on the current or accepted method. Singer, while working in Fredericksburg, invented a laborsaving mechanical device that successfully cut wood and metal as the operator drew.

In 1846, Singer, Sponsler, and their five children mysteriously vacated Fredericksburg and relocated a 120 miles to the east in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Pittsburgh was America's thirteenth largest city in the mid-nineteenth century, surpassing Rochester.[216] Pittsburgh owed much of its growth to its natural resources; the area was rich with petroleum, natural gas, lumber, and farm goods; but it was especially blessed with productive coalfields. However, the city had just suffered a devastating fire in 1845 that had destroyed one fourth of the city. Andrew Carnegie, an immigrant from Scotland, arrived in Pittsburgh shortly after the fire exclaims,

---

[215] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 32.

[216] United States Bureau of the Census, "Table 8: Population of the 100 Largest Places in 1850," (June 15, 1989). http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/tab08.txt (accessed March 31, 2013).

> The houses were mainly wood, a few only were brick, not one was fire proof. The entire population in and around Pittsburgh was not over forty thousand…Federal Street, Allegheny, consisted of straggling business houses with great open spaces between them….The site of our Union Iron Mills was then…a cabbage garden.[217]

Pittsburgh looked bleak after the fire, but it was on the cusps of becoming an industry giant. Ten years later, Carnegie gives a glimpse into how industry had consumed Pittsburgh, "Any accurate description of Pittsburgh at that time would be set down as a piece of the grossest exaggeration….The smoke permeated and penetrated everything....If you washed your face and hands they were as dirty as ever in an hour. The soot gathered in the hair and irritated the skin, and for a time...life was more or less miserable."[218] Great industry was coming; however, when Singer and Carnegie first lived in Pittsburg it was in the process of rebuilding and provided an ideal place for Singer to establish a workshop.

Using the knowledge he had gained in Fredericksburg, Singer successfully set up a workshop in Pittsburgh to create wood type and raised sign letters. On 10 April 1849, he received his second patent, this one for his carving machine that he had built while in Fredericksburg. Whereas his first patent, the mechanical excavator, was still viable even as the country converted from canal building to rail laying, the usefulness of the carving machine was about to expire. Two years prior to Singer's 1849 patent, Richard Hoe had

---

[217] Andrew Carnegie, *Autobiography of Andrew Carnegie* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1920), 40.

[218] Ibid., 93.

patented his rotary type printing press. With Hoe's new "lightning press" printing method, Singer's meticulous and time-consuming type plates printing style was destined to become obsolete.

The Singers remained in Pittsburgh for three years, 1846-1849, during which time Sponsler gave birth to two more children, Jasper Hamet and Mary Olive. They also changed their family name from their stage persona of Merritt back to Singer. Singer and his family enjoyed a better existence than they had while on the road with the Merritt Players. However, a comfortable lifestyle did not satisfy Singer. He was optimistic about the profits that could be made from the carving machine. Much like his father who had many years ago risked what he had in Germany for what he might obtain in America; Singer risked what he had in Pittsburgh for what he might obtain in New York City.

*Risk Taking, and New York City*

Singer was just one of many risk-takers that inhabited America in the mid-nineteenth century. This prevalent chance-taking personality was particularly due to the large number of immigrants. Immigrants, like Adam Singer, possessed a special type of gumption that prompted them to risk what they had at home for the promise of things being better in America. The immigrants' adventurous nature is seen in Levi Straus, who emigrated from Bavaria to New York City in 1845. In New York, he was employed with a dry goods business but in 1849, he gambled what he had, and traveled to San Francisco, California along with half a million other risk-takers. Straus, riding in a covered wagon journeyed 2,000 miles across America in hopes of making his fortune in the California Gold Rush, 1848-1855. Straus did not find his mother lode of gold by panning; instead,

through hard work and determination he built an empire worth millions based on rugged, utilitarian work pants that the miners wore—the Levi blue jean.[219]

In addition to economic risk-takers like Straus, Singer's world also had risk-takers who were willing to gamble social acceptance for social reform. Women, such as Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, faced public distain when they questioned the long-held traditional roles of separate spheres for men and woman. Mott and Stanton were signers of the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments, which maintained that women had the same rights to political, religious, economic, and social independence as men. The small minority of unusual women who fought for the doctrine of separate sphere were often ridiculed, criticized, and belittled. However, they continued to jeopardize their social status in hopes of obtaining something better for all women.

In 1849, Singer, following his risk-taking persona, moved his family to New York City. He went in hopes of finding a financial backer for his carving machine. He found a financier in A.B. Taylor, and acquired a machine shop, which enabled him the facility to build a prototype. The original carving machine had been left behind in Fredericksburg where for many years it continued to make wood type.[220] As Singer worked in the shop on Hague Street, the Singer family made their home in rooms on the Lower East Side at 130 East 27th Street.[221] In the vicinity of the Singer's home was the boarding house of Catherine Singer, the legal wife of Singer. She had returned to live in New York City

[219] Lynn Downey, Levi Strauss & Co. (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2007).

[220] Wayne County Historical Society & Museum, Wayne County Scrapbook, compliments of McIntire Davis & Greene Funeral Home, 216 E. Larwill Street, Wooster, Ohio, http://waynehistoricalohio.org/research/wayne-county-people-places-things/isaac-singer/ (accessed December 27, 2013).

[221] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 38.

sometime during the last thirteen years and was running a bordering house on Third Avenue.[222] It is not known what enticed her away from her home in Palmyra, but she was now living just a few blocks away from Singer, Sponsler, and their six children.

A family friend recalls how wretchedly poor Singer was at this stage in his life. Singer was "out at the elbows, without money or credit, and a large family to support…his children ran about the streets in patched garments."[223] The friend remembered eating at the Singer's humble home, "dinner and supper were taken together upon stewed meat and potatoes…we helped ourselves with pewter spoons from one common dish in the center of the pinewood table."[224] The Singer's New York home was cramped, dirty, and ill-ventilated, and according to *The Sanitary Condition of the Laboring Classes*, this shabby environment resulted in physical illness and moral degeneration of children and adults alike.[225] As his family struggled to be clothed and fed, Singer fixated on building a machine that could help bring his family out of destitution.

By 1850, Singer had completed his prototype and was demonstrating it to prospective buyers in the machine shop on Hague Street. One such potential buyer was George B. Zieber, an owner of a bookselling and publishing business in Philadelphia. On 4 February 1850, while Singer was away, a boiler exploded in the Hague Street building, destroying the prototype as well as killing sixty-three people.[226] The Hague Street

---

[222] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 88.

[223] Ibid., 39.

[224] Ibid.

[225] Spann, *The New Metropolis*, 143.

[226] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 38.

machine shop was not the first to experience this sort of catastrophe. Twelve years earlier in Ohio, the *Moseelle's* boilers exploded throwing "fragments of the boiler and human bodies" a quarter of a mile, and killing eighty-one people.[227] In 1850, a West Yorkshire woolen mill's boiler exploded, killing ten people.[228] The Hague Street tragedy provided an opportunity for local churches, businesses, and individuals to pull their resources together to help the bereaved families of the dead.[229] However, there was no compensation awarded or benevolence given for the loss of Singer's carving machine, and Taylor was not able to advance more money to build another. Although Singer was fortunate to survive the explosion, his future looked especially bleak—he was jobless and penniless, without a prototype, and had an ever-growing family to feed.

In his desperation, Singer remembered that prior to the explosion, he had demonstrated the machine to a potential buyer, Zieber, and now set out to locate him. After finding Zieber, Singer convinced him of the value of the carving machine to the publishing business. Zieber and two of his friends were able to raise 1,700 dollars to build another prototype to replace the one destroyed in the fire. According to the proposed contract, Singer was to be paid 600 dollars at once, and then would receive 2,400 dollars from the future sales of the machine. Part of the agreement stipulated that the enterprise be relocated to Boston, Massachusetts.

---

[227] James T. Lloyd, *Lloyd's Steamboat Directory, and Disasters on the Western Waters* (Philadelphia: Jesper Harding, 1856), 91.

[228] J.C. Robertson, ed., *The Mechanics' Magazine, Museum, Register, Journal, and Gazette* (London: Robertson and Co., 1850), 488-489.

[229] New York Common Council, *Report of the Special Committee Appointed by the Common Council for the City of New York: Relative to the Catastrophe in Hague Street on Monday February 4, 1850* (New York: McSpedon and Baker, 1850).

*Boston*

By 1 June 1850, Singer had spent his 600 dollars advance, built a new carving machine prototype, and was on his way to Boston; consequently, leaving both of his families to manage without him. Boston was a logical choice to exhibit the machine; it was a flourishing city, and one of the hubs for the publishing industry. Several publishing houses such as Ticknor, Reed, and Fields who printed the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *North American Review* as well as John P. Jewett and Company, the publisher of the soon to be influential *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, had made Boston their home.[230]

By the mid-nineteenth century, Boston was not only a home for the publishing industries but also one of the largest manufacturing centers for garment productions, leather goods, and machinery industries. Factory mills were bountiful due to the miles of falling water around the Boston area. Singer might have felt nostalgic, remembering his father's work as a millwright, as he watched the falling water propel the waterwheel that in turn provided the energy to make the mill's machines run. The mills were using machines to pick, card, spin, warp, and weave cloth; work that previously had been arduously done by hand. Undoubtedly, Singer took notice of the young women in the mills that skillfully and efficiently operated the machinery.

When Singer travelled to Boston, he was likely on one of the railcars that made up Boston's dense railroad network. As the Merritt Players had been traversing the roads in a horse-drawn wagon, railroad men were beginning to lay miles of tracks across America. The railways quickly overtook the canals; canals like the ones that Singer had been impressed with while in Rochester and had helped dig in Illinois. The trains were more

efficient, faster, operated year round, and could be built almost anywhere. The vast railways connected Boston to the North, the West, and the South.[231] The railroads boasted that seventy-five years earlier, it had taken George Washington eleven days to travel from Washington to Boston, now the same trip by train took only eleven hours and was pleasurable.[232] Boston with its 136,181 residences in 1850 had grown to be a transportation nucleus due to its internationally accessible ports, connecting waterways, and expansive rail system.[233]

The Boston railroads garnered much attention during the 1850s; however, it had to share the headlines with another type of railroad, the Underground Railroad. Just a few months after Singer's arrival in Boston, on 18 September 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act was passed. The Act declared that runaway slaves, which had found sanctuary in the North, had to, by law, be returned to their masters. From out of Boston, a city so steeped in the principles of freedom, grew a large anti-slavery movement. While living and working in Boston, Singer encountered abolitionists, some of whom covertly provided shelter to runaway slaves as they travelled a system of safe houses that lead to freedom across the Canadian border—the Underground Railroad.

If Singer stood with the Boston abolitionists providing safe haven for slaves or if he cheered as runaway slaves were returned to their owners is unknown. He does not

---

[231] Stephen Puleo, *A City So Grand: The Rise of an American Metropolis, Boston 1850-1900* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 40.

[232] Ibid., 41.

[233] United States Census Bureau, "1850 Fast Facts," http://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/fast_facts/1850_fast_facts.html (accessed December 27, 2013). The 1850 census was a landmark year in American census-taking. It was the first year in which the census bureau attempted to record every member of every household, including women, children and slaves. Accordingly, the first slave schedules were produced in 1850. Prior to 1850, census records had only recorded the name of the head of the household.

address his thoughts on the issue that was beginning to tear the country apart. His energy was focused on trying to demonstrate and sell his carving machine to Boston publishers. To better show the machine, Zieber had rented space in a machine shop owned by Orson C. Phelps at 19 Harvard Place in Boston. Singer and his carving machine retained the ground floor of the shop, while Phelps used the floor above for repairing and manufacturing sewing machines for the J.H. Lerow and S.C. Blodgett company.[234]

Although Boston held the promise of prosperous business, "Few publishers troubled to look at Singer's brainchild and none wanted to buy it."[235] While sitting and waiting for potential carving machine customers, Singer and Zieber observed that of the hundred and twenty sewing machines being built upstairs by Phelps only eight or nine worked well enough to be used in tailors' shops.[236] Due to the fact that Phelps was constantly trying to repair and adjust the machines; Singer surmised that the sewing machine's design was faulty, and that the machines were defective.

*Not the First Sewing Machine*

Several people had created and patented sewing machines well before Singer encountered the machines at Phelps's shop. As early as 1790, Thomas Saint, an English cabinetmaker, had been issued a British patent for a sewing machine.[237] Saint's machine incorporated several features found in a modern machine, but was wholly impractical in

[234] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 42.

[235] Kobler, "Mr. Singer's Money Machine."

[236] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 43.

[237] Grace Rogers Cooper, *The Sewing Machine: Its Invention and Development* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1976), 4.

operation.[238] Two Frenchmen in 1804 received a patent for a new machine whose principal design was "to replace handwork in joining the edges of all kinds of flexible materials, and particularly applicable to the manufacturing of clothing."[239] A French tailor, Barthelemy Thimonnier, in 1830, patented a clumsy, but somewhat functioning sewing machine.[240] The machine sewed 200 stitches a minute and was the first mechanical sewing device to be incorporated into commercial operation.[241] However, due to local journeymen's rejection of the idea of mechanical sewing, and the unrest created by the European Revolution of 1848, Thimonnier's efforts to further develop his machine were quashed.[242]

Walter Hunt, a Quaker from New York, applied for a patent in 1854. He showed that several years earlier, in 1834, he had made a working but inadequate sewing machine.[243] Hunt had resigned the pursuit of the sewing machine in 1834, because his daughter had convinced him that a sewing machine would eliminate the need for hand sewing seamstresses.[244] To Hunt, it seemed immoral to place these laborers out of much needed work; therefore, he abandoned the quest of a sewing machine.[245] Although Hunt never found fame with his sewing innovation, he did prove to have a penchant for

---

[238] Cooper, *The Sewing Machine: Its Invention and Development*, 4.

[239] Ibid., 6.

[240] Ibid., 11.

[241] Ibid.

[242] Ibid.

[243] "The Sewing Machine," *Scientific American*, July 25, 1896.

[244] Kobler, "Mr. Singer's Money Machine."

[245] Ibid.

inventing; he received several patents including one for the safety pin, the fountain pen, and the predecessor to the repeating rifle.

One of the best-known inventors of the sewing machine was Massachusetts-born Elias Howe Jr. who patented his machine in 1846. Howe had been an apprentice in one of the Lowell textile factories as well as in a shop that manufactured and repaired chronometers and other precision instruments. With the skill and knowledge he had gained as an apprentice, Howe produced a machine that according to the *Scientific American*, "sewed beautifully and stitched strong seams in cloth as rapidly as nine tailors."[246] However, Howe's machine still held serious limitations and flaws; one of which was that the machine took an estimated two months to construct at a cost of three hundred dollars.[247] Even with his machine that sewed "strong seams," Howe did not obtain any success with his machine when he first patented it.

By 1850, there had been several patents granted in America and other countries, but a practical machine capable of easing the burden of hand sewing did not exist.[248] All attempts were primitive and had ended in bitter disappointment. A pamphlet produced by the Singer Manufacturing Company claimed, "Every man who pretended to have a working machine was considered an impostor. Thousands had been deceived by inventors' statements and had bought machines which they were obliged to throw aside

[246]"Howe's Sewing Machine," *Scientific American,* September 26, 1846.

[247] James Parton, *The History of the Sewing Machine*, as quoted in Ruth Brandon, *Singer and the Sewing Machine: A Capitalist Romance*, 61; Frederick Lewis Lewton, *The Servant in the House: A Brief History of the Sewing Machine* (Washington, D.C.: Government Publishing Office, 1930), 580.

[248] Educational Department of the Singer Company, *The Invention of the Sewing Machine* (New York: The Singer Company, 1970?), 14. This fifteen-page pamphlet details the success and struggles of the different inventors of the sewing machine.

as useless."[249] Phelps's experience with the J.H. Lerow and S.C. Blodgett machine proved to be universal. Sewing machines in the middle of the nineteenth century were temperamental in nature, inadequate, and were a failure at replacing hand sewing.

*In Eleven Days and with Forty Dollars*

Singer, bored and discouraged by his lack of customers became interested in the troubled sewing machines being hauled to the second floor of the Boston shop. Examining the machines with the eyes of a machinist, Singer readily spotted the defect.[250] Phelps challenged Singer to draw a sketch of how to correct the problem. Within a day's time, Singer produced "a rough sketch for a mechanism that would greatly simplify the sewing machine's operation."[251] Ten years later, Phelps testified that Singer showed no interest in working on the sewing machine:

> I went to the carving-room, and Mr. Singer was sitting on a pile of boards near the carving machine, which he had purchased for the purpose of illustrating the movement and the cutting of the machine. I thought he appeared to be most dejected; he had been there some time and did not appear to have much success; and as I naturally wanted to encourage everybody all I could, I said to him, "Mr. Singer, I propose one thing: Leave this carving machine, and go with me into the sewing machine!" "Good God!" said he, "Phelps! Do you think I would leave this

[249] *The Story of the Sewing Machine 1897,* (New York: Frank V. Strauss, 1897), 18.

[250] Kobler, "Mr. Singer's Money Machine."

[251] Bissell, *The First Conglomerate*, 14.

ponderous machine and go to work upon a little contemptible sewing machine?"[252]

Eventually, Phelps managed to convince Singer that it was more profitable to invest his talents in the sewing machine, and to forego work on the carving machine. Phelps reasoned that the sewing machine appealed to a larger market and required less capital to construct than the carving machine. Singer relied, "Phelps! There is reason in that!" [253]

Phelps suggested that the three men, Phelps, Singer, and Zeiber form a partnership. Phelps was to provide the workspace, machinist tools, and the help of his workers.[254] Singer was to focus on the design and development of a working sewing machine, and Zeiber was to supply the financial support. Singer had convinced Phelps that Zeiber was a wealthy man with "something like eighty thousand dollars to spend in mechanical business, if he could make money out of it."[255] In reality, Zeiber had risked most of his money when funding the carving machine, and was only able to advance forty dollars to the new venture.

A contract was agreed upon, Phelps provided the workspace, Zeiber donated forty dollars, and Singer agreed to "contribute his inventive genius towards arranging a complete machine, and to do everything in his power towards perfecting the work."[256] Labor on the new machine was conducted in secrecy behind the locked door of Phelps's

---

[252] Testimony given in the patent suit Singer & Co. vs. Walmsley, as quoted in Ruth Brandon, *Singer and the Sewing Machine: A Capitalist Romance*, 43-44.

[253] Ibid.

[254] Bissell, *The First Conglomerate*, 15.

[255] Testimony given in the patent suit Singer & Co. vs. Walmsley.

[256] Agreement between Zieber, Singer, and Phelps as recalled by Zieber and quoted in Ruth Brandon, *Singer and the Sewing Machine: A Capitalist Romance* (Kodansha International, 1977), 46.

workshop. According to one of the workers, there was a sense of urgency as well as tension in the workshop.[257] Singer produced sketches using chalk on a piece of board, and then the machinists commenced working on it.[258] Each part of the machine had to be handmade and required a skilled machinist's talent. With the lean funds dwindling quickly, the pressure to build the machine grew. At one point, Singer became cross with one of the workers, and lashed out at him. The worker threw down his tools claiming he would not work for Singer any longer and stormed out of the workshop.[259] He did return the next morning and all seemed to have been forgiven.[260]

Although the atmosphere was demanding and tense, Singer was remembered as entertaining the workforce with his dramatic skills; workers recalled him acting out theatrical performances solo, speaking all the different parts.[261] Phelps's wife appeared to be enchanted by Singer's performances, claiming that he amused the crowds by flourishing around with his cane.[262] These burst of amusements were not included in an 1880 booklet that extolls Singer's solemn persistence in building the Singer sewing machine:

> Day and night he worked to produce a sewing machine, sleeping but three or four hours…and eating generally but once a day. He knew the machine must be built for forty dollars, or not be built at all. The hour of trial had come….The machine

[257] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 49.

[258] Ibid.

[259] Ibid.

[260] Ibid.

[261] Ibid.

[262] Testimony given in the patent suit Singer & Co. vs. Walmsley.

> had been completed… and it *did not work!* One by one the workmen left him in disgust, but the inventor clung tenaciously to his purpose, and refused to yield to defeat. All were gone but this companion [Zieber], who held the lamp while the inventor [Singer] worked. Loss of sleep, insufficient food, incessant work, and anxiety made him weak and nervous….Sick at heart, the task was abandoned, and at midnight, the worn and wearied men turned their backs upon their golden dreams and started for their lodgings. On their way they sat down on a pile of boards…[Zieber] mentioned to the inventor that "the loose loops of thread were all upon the upper side of the cloth." Instantly it flashed upon the inventor what the trouble was…back through the night the men trudged to the shop….Tightened a little tension screw and within minutes, ISAAC MERRITT SINGER had produced the first sewing machine that was…successful.[263]

In eleven days and with forty dollars, Singer created a practical sewing machine (Figure 1). The "iron seamstress" was born which would "lighten the work of millions of women in their homes and create a vast sewing industry…throughout the world."[264]

[263] *Genius Rewarded or the Story of the Sewing Machine* (New York: John J. Caulon, 1880). 4.

[264] *The Singer Company Elizabeth "The Great Factory"* (1976), 2. This twelve-page pamphlet was written and printed for the purposes of explaining important historical facts about the Singer Company. It focuses on the Elizabeth, New Jersey factory which was opened in 1873. The pamphlet details the company's diversification into other fields such as computers and the manufacturing of airplane parts.

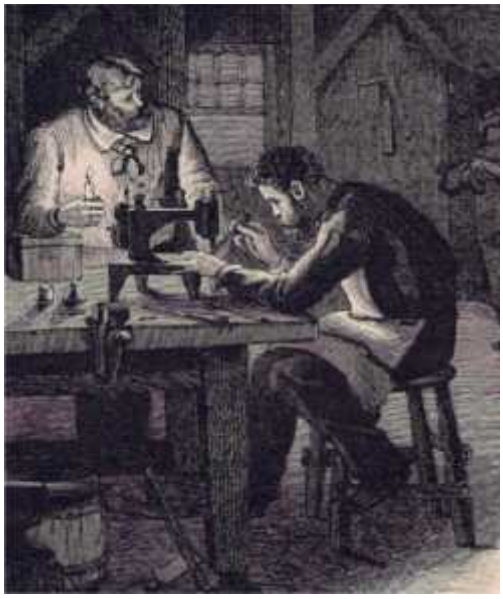

Figure 1. Singer Builds the First Working Sewing Machine.

The machine was christened the Jenny Lind Sewing Machine, after a famous Swedish singer recently discovered by P.T. Barnum. The name was very popular because Barnum was barnstorming across America promoting the songbird as well as extolling her name and talents in numerous newspapers. Zieber realized that Jenny Lind, although exceedingly popular, might drop out of favor; therefore, he suggested that the machine be named after Singer. Zieber reports that Singer did not like the idea; he "felt it was dishonorable for a Shakespearean actor to concern himself with such trivialities."[265] Singer showed little loyalty to his new invention, believing the machine to be a puerile thing whereas he preferred to be associated with something physically larger and less feminine.[266] Singer informed Zieber, just as he had with Phelps, that he did not want to have anything to do with the paltry business of the sewing machine. Singer displayed his

[265] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance,* 51.

[266] Ibid.

disdain for both women and the sewing machine when he retorted to Zieber, "You want to do away with the only thing that keeps women quiet, their sewing!"[267]

By 1850, Singer had tried several vocations with varying degrees of success. He continued to take risks and did not lose his determination when faced with disaster. Kogan reiterates, "The self-made man often has to overcome great obstacles to achieve his goals."[268]

As Singer's pugnacious attitude positioned him for success, Sponsler continued in her socially accepted role as guardian of the house. Although, Sponsler represented the majority of women in mid-nineteenth century America, there was a developing core of women reformists who were engaged in reshaping America—they challenged laws, fought for better wages, and questioned societies' axioms. DuBois and Dumenil comment, "As proponents of temperance and opponents of slavery, females had pushed at the boundary of the so-called woman's sphere and moved into more public roles…they openly breached boundaries, directing their utopian hopes and activist energies toward the freedom of women themselves."[269] However, for women like Sponsler, these freedoms seemed far away. Her life was dictated by regular intervals of pregnancy and childbirth and the desperate attempts to feed and care for her family often with little or no help from Singer.

[267] Ibid., 44.

[268] Kogan, *The Self-Made Man*, 3.

[269] DuBois and Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes*, 252.

## Chapter Three

### *A Need for a Sewing Machine*

Singer's motivation for creating the Jenny Lind sewing machine clearly was not a desire to lessen the woman's burden. Like almost every man, Singer had undoubtedly witnessed the toil of sewing in a woman's daily life. Along with cooking, sewing historically has been one of the most time-consuming burdens women have faced. For most women, sewing was simply a required part of life. The option of purchasing factory-made women's clothing was not widely available until 1890.[270] Laurel Thatcher Ulrich remarks that in a 1775 diary, "seventy-nine of the ninety-three work entries…describe some form of textile activity."[271] Sarah Smith in her 1838 diary comments, "Have been sewing all day" on a later entry she notes, "Feel some better, have been sewing hard all day. I find no rest."[272] In the 1862 diary of Lucy Buck in which Lucy declares that she is "very, very footsore and weary" she goes on to describe that meals, laundry, sewing, and cleaning had to be accomplished for the family of eleven still living at home.[273] A woman sewed clothes, shoes, and household goods not only for her

---

[270] Sarah A. Gordon, *"Make it Yourself": Home Sewing, Gender, and Culture 1890-1930* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2009), ASLS Humanities E-Book, paragraph 39.Although factory-made men's clothing was available for purchase starting in the mid-nineteenth century, mainly due to the need to clothe men for the Civil War, women would have to wait until 1890 before they had the option to purchase factory-made clothes for themselves and their children.

[271] Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 2001), 219.

[272] Clifford Merrill Drury and Bonnie Sue Lewis, *The Mountains We Have Crossed: Diaries and Letters of Oregon Mission, 1838* (Lincoln: Lincoln University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 69.

[273] Suzanna Bunkers, *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women's Diaries (*Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 217.

family which often consisted of herself, her husband, and their six or more children but also for her slaves.[274]

Although families generally did not have extensive wardrobes in the mid-1800s, each daily outfit entailed several pieces. For example, a typical woman's set of clothing in 1850 consisted of a chemise, calf or ankle-length drawers, a crinoline or corded petticoats, a corset, and, for outwear, a bodice and skirt.[275] The hem of the skirt typically had a circumference of approximately five feet.[276] In addition to everyday basic clothing needs, families required cloaks, coats, jackets, hats, and formal clothes. The households' quilts, bedding, and table linens also required a woman's sewing skills. Each of these items required yards and yards of fabric, which translated into hours and hours of onerous labor.

According to Anya Jabour, "Every woman had to sew…it was an essential skill to outfit homes."[277] All women sewed, but some, in addition to sewing for the personal family and homes had to make a living by the needle. A needle woman could be hired as a seasonal or full time seamstress to assist with a wealthy woman's household sewing. Or she might be employed by one of the nascent ready-made manufacturers who often hired a group of seamstresses to work together in a factory environment or as part of the put-out system. Those who sewed to support themselves, the hired seamstress, the

[274] Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1984), 118. Woloch states that the average American birth rate had dropped from 7.04 to 5.92 between 1800 and 1850. However, the decline represented the national average, families in most agricultural regions as well as immigrants and African Americans had more children than the average 5.92.

[275] Juanita Leisch, *Who Wore What?* (Gettysburg: Thomas Publications, 1995), 73; and Phyllis Tortora and Keith Eubank, *Survey of Historic Costume* (New York: Fairchild Publishing, 1994), 308.

[276] Ibid., 70.

[277] Anya Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 23.

factory worker, or the woman who took in put-out work were all especially finger sore from hours of sewing, and were especially in need of a machine that could sew faster and with less strain. According to the *New York Herald*, in 1853 there was not another class of workwomen who were paid as poorly or suffer more privation and hardship than that of the women who supported themselves by sewing.[278] The average seamstress who worked sixteen hour days made two and half dollars a week, which was not adequate to support one person for a week.[279] Thomas Hood's 1843 poem "The Song of the Shirt" reflects the burden of women of the nineteenth century who spent endless hours sewing:

> Work work work
>
> Till the brain begins to swim;
>
> Work work work
>
> Till the eyes are heavy and dim!
>
> Seam, and gusset, and band,
>
> Band, and gusset, and seam,
>
> Till over the buttons I fall asleep,
>
> And sew them on in a dream!
>
> Oh, Men, with Sisters dear!
>
> Oh, Men, with Mothers and Wives!
>
> It is not linen you're wearing out,

[278] Nancy F. Cott, ed., *No Small Courage: A History of Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford Press 2000), 273.

[279] Ibid.

But human creatures' lives!

Stitch stitch stitch,

In poverty, hunger, and dirt,

Sewing at once with a double thread,

A Shroud as well as a Shirt.[280]

Singer undoubtedly watched his mother, stepmother, wife, mistress, daughters, and countless other women labor over their daily sewing. Singer had observed men laboring while building the canals, and he created the excavating machine. He observed the troubles with typesetting, and created the carving machines. Singer saw women burdened with sewing all of his life; nevertheless, he never took the initiative to make a machine that performed the monotonous task of sewing until he was almost forty years old. However, Singer did not claim to have noble aspirations. He was interested in the potential money that the machines offered. In regards to his newest invention, the sewing machine, he emphatically proclaimed, "the dimes are what I am after."[281]

Regardless of Singer's motivation, he had created a machine that had the potential to ease women's sewing burdens and it was imperative that he obtain a patent. Zieber, once again scraped up enough money to pay the patent fees, and to send Singer to New York City to register the machine.[282] Singer applied for the patent possibly as early as

[280] Thomas Hood, "The Song of the Shirt" The Victorian Web. http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/hood/shirt.html (accessed March 31, 2011). The poem was first published in *Punch* on December 16, 1843.

[281] Testimony given in the patent suit Singer & Co. vs. Walmsley.

[282] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance,* 75.

September 1850; however, his patent, number 8294, was not granted until 12 August 1851.[283]

In addition to applying for the patent, Singer was also in New York City to witness the birth of another of his sons with Sponsler, Charles Alexander. The oldest son with Sponsler, Isaac Augustus (Gus) Singer, was thirteen years old at the time, and had been kept home from school in order to care for his younger brothers and sisters during the birth. He recalls that the physician and nurse, who were helping his mother, took notice of his father's sewing machine in the room. Although it was unquestionably an inappropriate time, Singer did not want to miss an opportunity to demonstrate his latest invention. In a somewhat awkward situation, Singer showed the features of his machine as his wife proceeded in labor in the same room. Charles Alexander Singer lived only four days after his birth.[284] Singer and Sponsler buried their son in the Greenwood Cemetery with both parents taking great care in selecting a headstone.[285]

*A Working Sewing Machine*

By November 1850, Singer had returned to Boston, and the three man enterprise, identifying themselves as the I.M. Singer & Co., placed advertisements in several newspapers proclaiming the amazing abilities of the "Singer & Phelps's Belay-stitch

[283] Cooper, *The Sewing Machine*, 31. The delay in receiving the patent is a mystery. Cooper states that the original application might have been abandoned by Singer or rejected by the patent office. In 1887, a fire in the Patent Office destroyed 76,000 models and in 1908, over 3000 models of abandoned patents were sold at auction. This possibly explains why Singer's original model submitted to the Patent Office in 1850 cannot be located.

[284] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 74.

[285] Eastley, *The Singer Saga*, 16.

Sewing Machine" while in New York City.[286] At this point, Phelps and Zieber may not have been aware that Singer had not patented the machine as the Singer & Phelps's Machine, but had submitted the patent for the I.M. (Isaac Merritt) Singer Sewing Machine, omitting Phelps's name. [287] The ads were addressed to journeymen, tailors, seamstress, employees, and all other interested in sewing of any description. They claimed that Singer had created the "perfect machine" capable of sewing "any kind of work from the stitching of a fine shirt-bosom to ship's sail," as well as leather.[288] The machine claimed to sew 500 to 1000 stitches per minute and was warranted to run one year without repairs.[289] Supporting the advertisement's assertions was an article printed in the *Boston Daily Times.* The author had personally seen the machine demonstrated in the Boston machine shop and was deeply impressed with its performance. The *Times* writes, "It is exceedingly neat and compact in its construction, and is in fact, the prettiest, simplest and most effective result of mechanical skill that we ever saw."[290] The article continues to comment that any woman with common intelligence could operate the

[286] Advertisements, *Saturday Evening Post,* December 7, 1850.

[287] United State Patent and Trademark Office, Patent 8294, August 12,1850, http://pdfpiw.uspto.gov/.piw?Docid=00008294&homeurl=http%3A%2F%2Fpatft.uspto.gov%2Fnetacgi%2Fnph-Parser%3FSect1%3DPTO1%2526Sect2%3DHITOFF%2526d%3DPALL%2526p%3D1%2526u%3D%25252Fnetahtml%25252FPTO%25252Fsrchnum.htm%2526r%3D1%2526f%3DG%2526l%3D50%2526s1%3D0008294.PN.%2526OS%3DPN%2F0008294%2526RS%3DPN%2F0008294&PageNum=&Rtype=&SectionNum=&idkey=NONE&Input=View+first+page.

[288] Isaac Singer, "Sewing Machine, Sewing by Machinery," *New York Daily Tribune*, December 27, 1850.

[289] Ibid.

[290] Singer, "Sewing Machine, Sewing by Machinery."

machine and the price of 125 dollars could quickly be recuperated because the machine would make the owner five or six dollars a day.[291]

Singer, Phelps, and Zieber were optimistic about their working sewing machine. More seasoned makers of the sewing machines, such as Blodgett of the Lerow and Blodgett machine, told Singer he was an "idiot" to try to sell a sewing machine.[292] Blodgett, who had the distinct advantage of being a tailor by trade, had produced the leading machine on the market and assured Singer that "sewing machines would never come into use."[293] He had three factories that used his sewing machine and all three had failed.[294]

Another example of the apparent hopelessness of the sewing machine industry was the career of Elias Howe, Jr. Howe, who had patented a machine in 1846, tried unsuccessfully in America and in England to sell his machine. In London, he faced heartache and bankruptcy as he failed to adapt his machine for the sewing of corsets. His wife, still in America, had fallen ill and lay destitute; he, across the Atlantic was penniless and unable to earn enough money to send to her. In desperation, he gave up his pursuit of the sewing machine, pawned his American patent rights to it, and sailed back home. He arrived in America insolvent but in enough time to see his wife just before she died.[295]

---

[291] Singer, "Sewing Machine, Sewing by Machinery."

[292] *Genius Rewarded,* 18.

[293] Ibid., 24.

[294] Frederick Lewis Lewton, *The Servant in the House: A Brief History of the Sewing Machine* (Washington, D.C.: Government Publishing Office, 1930), 571.

[295] Eastley, *The Singer Saga*, 13.

What set Singer's machine apart from the other machines such as Blodgett's and Howe's was that the Singer innovation was truly beneficial to the seamstress. According to a sewing machine historian, a practical working sewing machine required ten essential features: the lockstitch, an eye-pointed needle, a shuttle for the second thread, continuous thread from spools, a horizontal table, an overhanging arm, continuous feed, thread or tension control, a presser foot, and the ability to sew in a straight or curving line.[296] Although, Singer did not invent or patent all of these essential features, he did incorporate them into his machine. He combined his predecessors' inventions with his own to create a practical and useful sewing machine.

The ability to incorporate these features into one machine gave the Singer machine the clear advantage. Other machines possessed some of these features but not all. For example, Howe's machine required pinning the cloth to a baster plate, sewing the length of the plate, and then repining the cloth to sew the next section.[297] This process was a tedious and insufficient method for sewing a long seam, such as those found in a woman's skirt. The Singer machine provided a platform to hold the cloth horizontally, metal teeth under the cloth to smoothly and continuously feed the cloth, and a metal pressure foot on top of the cloth to help hold and guide the cloth. These innovative features allowed the operator to sew long uninterrupted seams without pinning and unpinning the cloth. The Singer machine also had a suspended vertical needle from an overhanging arm thereby allowing for curved and linear stitching which are necessary when constructing a shirt or blouse. The yielding spring, inspired by one of Singer's

[296] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 73.

[297] Ibid.,72.

younger son's toy guns, permitted the tension on the thread to adjust to different cloth's thickness.[298] The spring allowed the seamstress to sew a variety of different weights of cloth, from the fine silk of a dress to the heavy wool of a frock. In addition to these innovated features, Singer had fashioned a wooden crate to carry the machine. The crate, when turned over, could be used as a table with the machine securely placed on top. Singer then invented a metal treadle that fit inside the crate and was connected to a large wheel. When the treadle was rocked, using a heel-and-toe action, the needle moved in and out of the cloth and the metal teeth fed the cloth. With the invention of the treadle, which due to an oversight was never patented, the operator could control the speed of the machine by pumping the treadle with their feet. Other machines required the operator to use one hand to spin the hand wheel, and the other to guide the cloth. The Singer machine had the advantage because by using the treadle, both of the operator's hands were free to guide the cloth as it glided under the needle.

Attesting to Singer's true genuineness, he had created a machine that really worked. The *Scientific American* claimed that "this machine does good work."[299] Not only was it beneficial to the seamstress, it did not require constant adjustments. Previously, machines had been mechanical nightmares requiring constant repairs and adjustments—they were more trouble than they were worth. Singer wrote that on his early sales trips he was often shown out the door when he tried to show his machine to persons who had previously purchased and become disgruntled with a competitor's

[298] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance* , 74.

[299] "Singer's Sewing Machine," *Scientific American*, November 1, 1851, 1.

machine.[300] The time spent in Phelps's workshop proved that the Lerow and Blodgett machine required a skilled mechanic to keep it functioning. The Singer machine did not require a mechanic to keep it operational.[301] It was even guaranteed to work for a full year without repairs. Singer promised that his machines "never gets the 'fits' which try a woman's patience, destroy the fruits of her labor, and consume her time in vexing attempts to coax the machine to a proper performance of duty."[302]

A machine that really worked and did not require constant adjustments could truly alleviate the arduous and time-consuming task that dominated women's lives. The timesaving nature of the sewing machine became obvious in an experiment comparing the speed in which a garment could be completed by a woman using a sewing machine versus the time it took her to sew the same task by hand. For example a gentlemen's shirt took fourteen hours and twenty-six minutes to stitch by hand. A sewing machine constructed the same shirt in one hour and sixteen minutes.[303] A silk dress required over ten hours of labor when sewn by hand, but only one hour and thirteen minutes with a sewing machine.[304] It was clear by the results that the sewing machine held the distinct advantage over hand-sewing. The sewing machine allowed women to sew almost twenty times faster than they ever had before, as fast as a yard a minute.[305] For a woman who

---

[300] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 79.

[301] Bissell, *The First Conglomerate*, 17.

[302] *The Story of the Sewing Machine 1897*, 23.

[303] John Saunders and Westland Marsten, "Help for Women," *National Magazine*, 1857, 33. The magazine, volume ten, is published by W. Tweedie in London. The data for the article is provided by the Wheeler and Wilson Sewing Machine Company. The Singer Manufacturing Company takes over the Connecticut-based Wheeler and Wilson Company in 1904.

[304] Ibid.

[305] Saunders and Marsten, "Help for Women."

made her living by sewing, the benefits of owning a sewing machine were boundless. She could still complete the same number of projects in a fraction of the time, therefore affording her more time to take in additional sewing, to care for her family, or to take some much needed rest. Either way the sewing machine was a windfall for the seamstress.

*Years of Theater Pay Off*

A working and practical sewing machine was clearly beneficial to the weary seamstress, and Singer laid claim to such a machine. Singer's efforts and ingenuity had earned him the title of a great inventor but without his years of theatrical training, his invention could have easily fallen into obscurity. He did not remain in the workshop hoping for the public to embrace his machine; instead, he travelled the country, much as he had done with the Merritt Players.[306] Singer actively promoted the wonders of the sewing machine in halls, fairs, and carnivals with the enthusiasm and flare of a true showman.[307] He was remembered giving recitations of the "Song of the Shirt," while showing the easy of sewing with a Singer sewing machine.[308] The ever-virile Singer unabashedly flirted with giggling ladies as he mended their torn dresses or fashioned a flock.[309]

To drive the public to see his demonstrations, Singer placed advertisements in papers, which often included outrageous jokes and puns, "Why is a Singer Sewing

[306] Eastley, *The Singer Saga*, 45.

[307] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 73.

[308] Ibid.

[309] Kobler, "Mr. Singer's Money Machine."

Machine like a kiss? Because it seams so good."[310] Barnum, a publicity genius, who had successfully enticed the masses to see headliners such as Jenny Lind the Swedish Nightingale; General Tom Thumb the twenty-five inch grown man; and the FeeJee Mermaid, the sham mermaid from the Fiji Islands, had proven that people of the mid-nineteenth century loved a show. Singer, with his years of theatrical experience, his commanding stature, and thunderous voice, knew how to put on a show.

Singer was not the only showman in his family to promote the machine. While shopping for his sons, Singer was able to sell two machines at 125 dollars apiece to a clothing shop on Broadway.[311] He employed his son, Gus Singer, to bring the machines to the shop on Thanksgiving Day 1850. His son was then to remain in the store's window operating one of the machines until after New Year's Day, 1851.[312] Gus Singer remembers sewing the plain, simple garments while a hired Boston seamstress sitting next to him in the store window sewed the more complicated clothing.[313] He also recalls that he did not receive any reward or compensation from his father or the company for his effort, such a neglect being "very likely to impress itself upon a boy's memory."[314] Although Singer could boast about the success of a working machine, he could not yet brag about his financial success. In reality, Singer was not able to pay his son, and was himself very discouraged with his lack of monetary accomplishments. He was so

[310] Kobler, "Mr. Singer's Money Machine."

[311] Charles Eastley, *The Singer Saga*, (Braunton: Merlin Books, Ltd., 1983), 44.

[312] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 75.

[313] Ibid.

[314] Ibid.

"distressed for want of money that he offered to sell out all his interest in the business for 1,500 dollars."[315]

It was during one of Gus Singer's daily window demonstrations that Howe, a later nemesis of Singer's, saw the Singer machine and began to complain that the machine was an infringement on his patent.[316] Sometime in early 1851, Howe approached Singer and demanded 2,000 dollars for the right to use his patent. Singer, who did not even have the finances to pay his own son, claimed not to have the funds to pay Howe. Howe, desperate for money and nursing a feeling of injustice, continued to pester Singer for compensation. Singer quarreled with Howe over the idea, ultimately threatening to kick Howe down the steps of the machine shop.[317]

As Howe could attest, Singer was an explosive and difficult man to have as an adversary. He was also a volatile man to have as an employer, a companion, or a business partner. When an employee suggested a method for improving the sewing machine, one which later was adopted, Singer roared, "Young man, who in hell is inventing this machine?"[318] Sponsler, whose gentleness towards Singer "would have tamed even a tiger," knew Singer well enough "to know that he would kill her as recklessly as he would a fly, if she gave him even the least annoyance."[319]

---

[315] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance* , 77.

[316] Ibid., 75.

[317] Ibid., 76.

[318] James Bolton, "James Bolton's recollections of his forty years' experience with the Singer Manufacturing Company," 1901, 3. This transcript is the memories of James Bolton written in 1901 regarding his forty years of service to the Singer company beginning in 1852. The original copy is in the possession of his grandson, Wilbur Calhoun Smith in Lake Forest, Illinois.

[319] *Probate of the Last Will and Testament of Isaac M. Singer.*

*Fate of Business Partners - Phelps, Zieber, Ransom, and Clark*

Business partners also knew Singer's fury. Early in the partnership between Singer, Phelps, and Zieber, Singer instigated a plan to buy Phelps out of his share of the firm, offering him a pittance of the company's future value. Singer claimed that Phelps "was intemperate and a great clog upon the business" and set out to bully Phelps into submission.[320] Zieber remembered Singer behaving in the most brutal and insulting manner toward Phelps, until Phelps resigned in December of 1850.[321] After ridding themselves of Phelps, Singer and Zieber acquired another partner, Barzillan Ransom, a businessman who manufactured cloth bags for packaging salt.[322] Gus Singer distinctively remembers demonstrating the sewing machine to Ransom because he got his finger under the plate, resulting in the tip being cut off by the shuttle driver.[323] It was only a short time before Ransom wrote Phelps complaining, "Mr. Singer is rather singular in his views but the writer does not wish to cross him….Singer assumes so much authority and plays the dictator in such magnificent style that he is perfectly insufferable."[324] According to Zieber, "Singer's extremely irritable dispositions, and his abusive and overbearing conduct" led to Ransom's resigning in May 1851.[325] Singer's "violence and

[320] Eastley, *The Singer Saga*, 44.

[321] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 79.

[322] Ibid., 78.

[323] Ibid., 79

[324] Ibid., 81.

[325] Ibid.

brutality exhibited toward Ransom aggravated his illness;" an illness which ultimately resulted in Ransom's death a few months later.[326]

After eradicating Phelps and Ransom from the company, Singer set out to find a new partner, claiming, "it was absolutely necessary for us to have in the firm some person of recognized legal ability, who could attend to financial matters and the suits."[327] With Howe's accusations circling, it was advantageous to look for a partner with legal talents. Singer found Edward Clark, a respectable and skilled New York lawyer. Clark was the antithesis of Singer; he was taciturn, reserved, and austere. He had been reared in a middle-class respectable family, attended private schools, and had graduated from Williams College. He taught Sunday school, and had been married for sixteen years to a reputable woman, Caroline Jordon Clark. Since the company did not have money to pay for Clark's services, they proposed that Clark accept an equal share in the business in return for his legal services.[328] Clark agreed, and immediately began to address Howe's infringement claims as well as devise new marketing strategies. Although Clark proved to be essential to the company's future success, it was unmistakably clear that he and Singer were soon at odds. Zieber describes the relationship; "the one as heartily hated his partner as the other, in his turn, despised his fellow….There was no personal friendship between them."[329] Singer once asked if anyone had seen Clark without his wig. When asked why, Singer replied, "Because he is the most contemptible looking object I ever

[326] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance,81.*

[327] Ibid.

[328] Ibid., 81-82.

[329] Ibid., 87.

saw with his wig off."[330] Clark and Singer disliked each other intensely, but Clark recognized Singer's creative talents and Singer needed Clark's business expertise—so the relationship, as tumultuous as it was, endured.[331]

The same cannot be said of Zieber, the partner who had financed Singer after the explosion of the carving machine and had scraped together the forty dollars for the construction of the sewing machine. Zieber, seeing that the company was beginning to turn a profit, believed that he was entitled to recoup the money he had advanced. At least, he thought he should be given a written agreement officially stating the money he was due. He approached Singer on the morning of 10 May 1851 and observed that

> He had not yet risen from his bed, I was requested by Mrs. Singer to go up to his room. After the usual salutations of the morning… I spoke to him about the subject in question…in a great rage, and in a rough way – usual with him –Singer replied, "What do you mean? By God, you've got enough! You shan't have any more!" I sank down upon a chair at the foot of his bed without the power of utterance, more affected not at what I was about to lose [but] at the unutterable baseness and ingratitude of the man whom I had assisted step by step from the greatest poverty and comparative ignorance in business to the good fortune and prospects, he then enjoyed.[332]

---

[330] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 148-149.

[331] Bissell, *The First Conglomerate,* 8.

[332] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 82-83.

After this encounter, Zieber went to Clark for counsel, Clark responded, "Singer is a very stubborn and difficult person to get along with."[333] Clark pointed out that the machine's patent was in Singer's name alone, and then advised Zieber to sell his stock in the company.[334] Zieber acknowledged that the irascible Singer legally held the patent, and therefore, the power. He also admitted that Singer was "capable upon any slight pretext of taking the balance of my interest, and appropriating it to his own use."[335] However, Zieber decided not to sell his portion; he trusted that his longtime friend and partner would ultimately be fair and faithful to him.

Zieber was wrong. On 15 December 1851, Singer came to visit Zieber who had taken suddenly ill. According to Zieber, Singer said to him, "The doctor thinks you won't get over this. Don't you want to give up your interest in the business altogether?"[336] Singer built the case that if Zieber sold out now, then he would be able to provide money to his grieving family, ensuring their care before he passed. In reality, it was all a trick; the doctor had never given such a diagnosis. At this juncture, Zieber knew for certain that his old friend wanted "to dispose of him."[337] Zieber, lacking faith in Singer's character, took the 6,000 dollars buyout offer, and signed away his portion in the I.M. Singer & Co.[338]

---

[333] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 84.

[334] Ibid.

[335] Ibid.

[336] Ibid., 85.

[337] Ibid.

[338] Ibid., 87.

Although the company, which was now headed by just two partners, Clark and Singer, was able to pay off Zieber, albeit in installments, it was still struggling financially.[339] A company agent whose territory included Connecticut, and the West, felt successful when he sold a machine every two or three weeks.[340] Some weeks, due to lack of funds, production had to be stopped in the Boston workshop and the workmen sent home.[341] One of the main reasons that the company was still floundering was the public did not readily accept the idea of a respectable Victorian woman owning and operating a machine.

*Ladies Can and Should Operate Machines*

Sewing machines, in general, met opposition by many people because they threatened the socially-desired "lady-like" icon. A common conception of nineteenth-century women included them sedately stitching by hand in familial environments often in the company of other women. When instructing women on proper manners and etiquette, they were reminded that "the exercise of the needle, at proper intervals, is graceful in the female sex, and is well adapted to the constitutions and sedentary life."[342] One of the reasons that sewing was an acceptable employment for women was that needlework was safely within the realm of woman-work. It was becoming to her sex, even if she sewed eighteen hours a day for a living. However, the idea of women

[339] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 87.

[340] Ibid., 88.

[341] Ibid., 87.

[342] John Burton, *Lectures on Female Education and Manners* (Elizabeth-Town: S.Kollock, 1799), 72.

operating noisy machinery defied this deeply ingrained stereotype and caused some to rebuff the innovation.

To overcome this perception, Singer and Clark cleverly marketed the machine to appeal to a woman's desire to improve her life as well as the lives of her children and family. A proper Victorian lady could embrace owning a sewing machine if it helped her family. The Singer machine was available to help women who had previously been burdened with cooking and sewing. With the time she saved by using a sewing machine she could instruct her children, care for her family, and help the world. A woman who did not put her hand sewing away and embrace the sewing machine was selfish and denied her children, family, and the world of happiness:

> Whatever brings added comfort to the matron and the maiden, whatever saves the busy housewife's time and increases her opportunities for culture, whatever lifts any of the heavy household burdens and disenthralls to any degree the women of our day, contributes an ever-augmenting influence toward the highest and best progress of the world. And so the great importance of the sewing-machine is in its influence upon the home; in the countless hours it has added to woman's leisure for rest and refinement; in the increase of time and opportunity for that early training of children, for lack of which so many pitiful wrecks are strewed along the shores of life.[343]

Another way that Singer and Clark tried to get the public to accept the idea of a respectable Victorian woman owning a sewing machine was by offering the machine at a

[343] *The Story of the Sewing Machine 1897*, 9.

discounted price to the most respectable women of the town—the wives of "pastors of churches and ministers of the gospel of every denomination."[344] The wives of pastors and ministers were often the poorest and had large families to clothe. They could especially benefit from a sewing machine, and when offered one at half the price, they gladly accepted it. The purpose of this generous offer was simple: "We do not care to disclaim the general desire to do good to others; but the offer above made, liberal as it certainly is, is founded upon ordinary business calculation."[345] The prospect of sales drove their offer; if the most virtuous of women embraced a Singer sewing machine, then the congregation would also.

Establishing elegant showrooms was another method Singer used to change the negative perception of a lady using a sewing machine. A respectable Victorian woman who was concerned with maintaining her image might shun the vulgarity of a business showroom. But a lady that entered Singer's showroom was impressed with the beautiful marble floors, expensive carpets, detailed woodwork, and voluminous drapes. Plush seating and refreshments were available to create "a place that ladies would not hesitate to visit."[346] Several machines were stationed in the center of the showroom, and Singer with his staff of meticulously trained young women were on hand to demonstrate the benefits of owning a Signer sewing machine.

With cleaver advertising, discounts to ministers' wives, and the creations of lady-approved showrooms, Singer was overcoming the stigma of a woman using a sewing

---

[344] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 12.

[345] Ibid., 126.

[346] Ibid., 131.

machine. But he also had to address the question of a woman's capability to operate machinery.

Women, who were convinced to put their hand-sewing away, were skeptical of their personal ability to operate these new technological wonders. Dr. Charles Meigs of Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia proclaimed that women's heads were "too small of intellect and just big enough for love…the great administrative faculties are not hers."[347] To illustrate that women were competent to operate a Singer machine, Singer and Clark hired young women to demonstrate machines in the company's Broadway shop window. According to Clark, "a nice little girl is operating a machine in [the front window under the company's office] to the great entertainment of the crowd."[348] The Barnum's American Museum, 1841-1865, was located just a few blocks from the Singer office. Although the museum offered both strange and educational attractions, it was the nice little girl operating the Singer sewing machine that drew the bigger crowd.[349]

Augusta Eliza Brown, one of I. M. Singer's first employees learned to operate the machine in just two weeks.[350] She was instructed to "not forget to call attention to the fact that this instrument is particularly calculated for female operatives."[351] Brown, along with other women who demonstrated the machine at church gatherings, fairs, and even the circus, proved that women were capable of successfully operating a sewing machine

---

[347] Gail Collins, *America's Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2003), 89.

[348] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 125.

[349] Bissell, *The First Conglomerate*, 2.

[350] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 124.

[351] *Illustrated News*, June 25, 1853, quoted in Don Bissell, *The First Conglomerate: 145 Years of the Singer Sewing Machine Company*, (Brunswick: Audenreed Press, 1999), 16.

(Figure 2). Possibly due to his knowledge of how competently women in the Boston-area factories had managed their machines, Singer readily believed that women should and could operate his machine. By placing diminutive young women as demonstrators he showed faith in women's abilities and made his message clear, all women "Even tiny, frail women can operate a Singer!"[352]

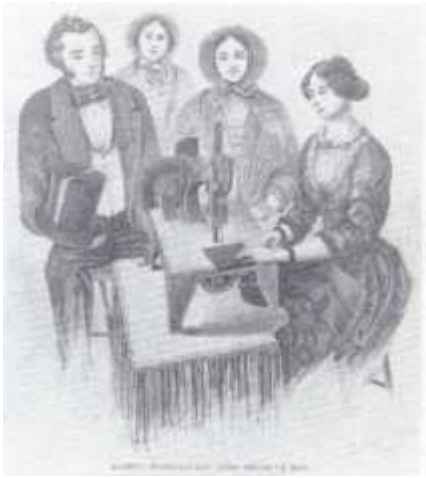

Figure 2. A Woman Demonstrating a Singer Sewing Machine

Singer's efforts helped the reluctance and skepticism toward the sewing machine to lessen. Gradually more people accepted the concept of a proper lady owning a sewing machine and her ability to operate it. On 25 June 1853, a reporter states that the sewing machine "has within the last two years acquired a wide celebrity, and established its character as one of the most efficient labor-savor instruments ever…it is calculated for female operatives…never to be monopolized by men."[353]

[352] Bissell, *First Conglomerate*, 2.

[353] *Illustrated News.*

*Family Life, Marys, and Move to New York City*

Between 1850 and 1853, Singer had spent much energy developing and manufacturing a practical machine, convincing the public of its value, and promoting it across the country. He also focused on reconstructing the firm, hiring and firing partners, and overcoming society and chauvinistic prejudices. Although these endeavors consumed much of his time, he did not neglect his personal life during these years. In 1852, Singer moved his family from the squalor of the Lower East Side where Singer was remembered as "tinkering with his invention and conducting business in the room in which Mary Ann [Sponsler] had just given birth" to a more respectable, but very modest address near Fourth Avenue.[354] Later, as his earnings began to grow, Singer moved them to Fourth Avenue where they stayed for several years.[355] Singer also reconnected with his first-born son, William Singer, from his legal union with Catherine Singer. William Singer, now seventeen years old, was working as a firm's agent, selling machines in New Jersey and New York.[356] Much like his father, William Singer appeared to be enchanted with the theater. In a letter, William Singer was accused of being absent from work, and when at work, he was preoccupied with writing a play for one of the theaters.[357] It is possible that Singer also rekindled a relationship with his daughter, Lillian Singer, and his wife, Catherine Singer who were living in close proximately.

Although Singer had several children; a woman he was legally married to but was not living with; a faithful mistress whom he lived with and had promised to marry; and a

[354] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance,* 141.

[355] Ibid.

[356] Ibid., 88.

[357] Ibid.

fledging business—he found time to begin two affairs. Between 1850 and 1851, Singer began dalliances with Mary McGonigal of San Francisco and Mary Eastwood Walters of New York. Both of these women were currently living in New York City and both relationships resulted in the birth of children.

The fact that Singer was having affairs with three women simultaneously was unusual, the fact that they all shared the first name Mary: Mary Ann Sponsler, Mary McGonigal, and Mary Eastwood Walters was not. From the first census in 1850 until 1946, the most frequently selected female name in America was Mary.[358] According to the 1850 United States census, a girl was twice as likely to be named Mary, than the second most frequently selected female name, Sarah.[359]

Did Sponsler know about these Marys, the affairs, and the children? Doubtlessly she suspected Singer of philandering, but she was exceedingly busy raising her own children, and in 1852, she was preoccupied with caring for her newly born daughter, Julia Ann Singer. The youngest Singer did not survive her first year; she was buried next to her brother, Charles Alexander Singer, in the Greenwood Cemetery.[360] New York statistics claim that in 1852, children under ten years of age accounted for 62 percent of

[358] According the United States Census of 1850, 1880, and 1920 the name "Mary" was the most frequently selected female name in America. The census of 1850 records data for children born as early as 1801. From 1801 to 1946, Mary dominated the number one slot as the most popular name. Second place names, such as Elizabet, Ann, and Helen never rivaled the popularity of Mary. According to the United States Social Security administration, Linda surpassed Mary in 1946, after a 145-year reign.

[359] 1850 United States Census Name Frequencies, These were derived from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series 1% sample of the 1850 Census of Free Populations, found in Steven Ruggles and Matthew Sobek, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 1.0* (Minneapolis:University of Minnesota, 1995). http://www.buckbd.com/genea/1850fnfl.txt (accessed December 23, 2013).

[360] Eastley, *The Singer Saga*, 16.

all the deaths in the city.[361] According to medical authorities, the primary cause for the high child mortality rate was the heavy consumption of local swill milk.[362] The milk came from cows that had been fed solely on the waste products from distilleries. The swill milk was blamed for "cholera infantum, diarrhea, [and] other killers of children, especially of infants under two."[363] Both Julia Ann Singer and her brother before her most likely fell victim to one of these swill milk induced illnesses.

In addition to the two affairs, and the birth and death of Julia Ann Singer, it was during the 1850-1853 period that Clark and Singer decided to relocate the company's manufacturing headquarters to New York City. In 1852, they closed the doors at Phelps's workshop in Boston, cutting Phelps out of even the profits of manufacturing the machines in his shop.[364] The new twenty-five by fifty foot factory was housed over the New York and New Haven Railroad depot. The company still produced every machine by hand and at the bench, with no two machines or parts being exactly alike.[365] The Singer factory eventually became one of the first manufactures to convert from the European method, making one machine at a time, to the mass production method used by the American armories, in which they produced machines with interchangeable parts that did not require hand fitting.[366]

---

[361] Spann, *The New Metropolis*, 123.

[362] Ibid.

[363] Ibid.

[364] David Hounshell, *From the American System to Mass Production, 1800-1932: The Development of Mass Production, 1800-1932* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 88.

[365] Ibid., 85 and 88.

[366] Ibid., 90-91. Although efforts were initiated as early as 1863, it was not until 1882, that the Singer factory successfully and completely produced machines with interchangeable parts. In attempts to mass produce the machine, the company moved from the railroad depot location to a larger shop on Mott

However, in 1852, over the railroad depot, workmen were being paid an hourly wage to make each part of every sewing machine by hand. [367] A foreman oversaw the construction, leaving Singer free to traverse the countryside demonstrating the machine. While out demonstrating, Singer often discovered essential modifications to enhance the machine's performance. He sketched the improvements and sent them to the factory to be integrated into the machine's construction. In the search to make the machine operate better and smoother, Singer developed and patented twenty new features for his sewing machine.[368] By the end of 1853, Singer had sold 810 machines, and due to his continual mechanical advances and innovative marketing he had every reason to finally be confident about his future. [369]

*Howe, Patents, and the Sewing Machine War*

Singer would have certainly been optimistic about his future, if he was not facing an obstacle that had the potential to bankrupt I.M. Singer & Co. In 1851, Howe had asked Singer to pay 2,000 dollars for the use of his patent; Singer had responded with threats of physical violence. After their futile meeting, Howe set forth to retrieve the American patent rights that he had previously pawned in Europe. With this undisputable evidence in hand, Howe initiated a $25,000 patent infringement claim against Singer.[370]

---

Street, New York. However, it was not until the company moved to the facility in Elizabeth, New Jersey that it completely transitioned from "at the bench" to mass producing with interchangeable parts.

[367] Ibid., 85 and 88.

[368] Bissell, *The First Conglomerate,* 17.

[369] Hounshell, *American System to Mass Production*, 89.

[370] *Genius Rewarded,* 24.

Not even with their increased sales volume was the company in a financial position to pay such a claim. Howe held a patent, United States patent 4750, for a machine with the lockstitch feature, a feature that was essential to any working sewing machine. Singer was outraged that Howe's patent was based on nothing more than a prototype, he did not have a working machine; whereas, Singer had over 800 machines humming across the country.[371] Singer and Clark actively fought the claim, trying to prove that Howe's patent was really an infringement on Hunt's earlier machine; however, the courts ruled in favor of Howe. In 1854, after three years of litigation, Howe was rewarded $15,000 in damages, and royalties of $25 per machine.[372] When Howe's patent expired, he had received royalties up to $2,000,000. In 1867, he died one of the richest men in the county—he had "litigated his way to fortune and fame."[373]

The *Howe v. Singer* case proved to be a catalyst for more litigation from the quickly multiplying number of sewing machine makers. Since 1851, several machine makers such as the American Sewing Machine Company of New York, Ames Manufacturing Company of Massachusetts, and John Batchelder & Co. of Connecticut, had formed and were eager to participate in the potentially lucrative sewing machine industry.[374] Regardless of how eager they might have been, they all faced a major obstacle in building a sewing machine. Due to the complexity of the sewing machine, a manufacturer could not avoid building a machine without relying on parts that had been

[371] Bissell, *The First Conglomerate*, 43.

[372] Cooper, *The Sewing Machine*, 34 and 41.

[373] "Sewing Women and Sewing Machines," *Home Journal*, April 25, 1852, 95.

[374] David G. Best, "A-Z American Sewing Machine Manufactures," Antique and Visual Sewing Machine Museum, http://www.sewmuse.co.uk/american%20sewing%20machine%20manufacturers.htm (accessed December 29, 2013).

invented and patented by several different people. Not even Howe could build a machine without infringing on other maker's patents. With Howe as the trailblazer, sewing machine manufacturers became consumed with suing one another over patents. Singer, possibly due to his flamboyant demonstrating and aggressive advertising, was the most well-known and, therefore, the largest target for these patent litigations. A lawyer recounts the endless litigation Singer faced; "he had suits pending in Philadelphia—several of them—some against Wheeler and Wilson, another against Grover and Baker; he had fifteen or sixteen suits pending in the Northern District of New York…several in the Southern District of New York…one made by Bartholf."[375]

Singer, who had spent forty years in a battle against poverty, was not going to idly sit in a courtroom as his empire was litigated away. With typical Singer style he passionately fought in what became known as the Sewing Machine War, 1851-1856. Singer's first tactic was to portray himself as the humble inventor who only wished to bring a reasonably priced sewing machine into a fair market. He relayed that he wanted to help the weary-fingered women who still sang the "Song of the Shirt."[376] Singer's true motivation for creating the machine, the dimes, had to be eased and replaced with a more public and jury friendly motivation: the pursuit of helping women.

He also capitalized on the fashionable and praiseworthy image of being a rags-to-riches man. The title fit him well; he was a man of low origins, uneducated, and without means, who against all odds, had worked hard, and fulfilled the American dream. In his

[375] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance,* 97.

[376] *Genius Rewarded,* 26.

1853 interview, he takes care to be characterized as self-made and self-educated.[377] Singer wanted the public to see him as a man who had forged his own path, worked hard, and had achieved great things. Singer aligned himself with a contemporary rags-to-riches man, the famous novelist, Charles Dickens. Dickens as a young child was forced to work ten hours days in a rat infested shoe polish factory. Although, he had a tumultuous childhood and was without family wealth or education, Dickens found success through hard work and tenacity.

In addition to carefully creating his own image, Singer wanted to expose the other manufacturers as greedy and gluttonous. Singer painted Howe as endeavoring to establish a strong monopoly on the industry; therefore, depriving deserving women of their dear machines.[378] Singer, on the other hand wanted to throw the industry open, offering fair and honest competition at moderate prices.[379] Singer wanted the public to not be fooled by Howe's selfishness. Howe was making threatening suits and injunctions against all who made, used, even sold sewing machines:

> CAUTION—All persons are cautioned against publishing the libelous advertisement of I.M. Singer &Co. against me, as they will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law for such publications. I have this day commenced an action for damages against the publishers of the said Singer &Co. infamous libel upon me in the morning's *Tribune*.

[377] "Portraits of the People."

[378] *Genius Rewarded,* 26.

[379] Ibid.

> Recently I sued Messrs. Wooldredge, Keene & Moore in the United States Court for infringing on my original patent by using and selling the Singer Sewing Machine and obtained an injunction against them from said Court.
>
> All persons making, selling, or using the Singer machine or any others without a license from me will be prosecuted in this and other districts to final judgment and satisfactory—July 27, Elias Howe, Jr. No. 305 Broadway[380]

Singer commented that the other sewing machine manufacturers, when viewing the litigation between himself and Howe, were like a frontiersmen's wife as she watched the struggle between her husband and a grizzly. To her, it did not make much difference who won; "she just loved to see a right lively fight."[381] If Singer won the battle with Howe, then all others "would reap the full benefit of the victory without cost to themselves; if Howe should win, they would be no worse off than they were before, and he would probably cripple their most formidable competitor."[382] To Singer it did matter who won, and he tried to convince the public that if he were the victor, then women would have a machine that really worked and was affordable.

The fear of losing in the Sewing Machine War weighed heavily on Singer. He had worked to portray himself as a rags-to-riches man who had invented the machine for the good of womankind, he had warned the public of other manufacturers' villainous ways, and now he had to sit in a courtroom and endure the testimonies from his rivals.

---

[380] Classified Advertisement, *New York Daily Times,* August 2, 1853.

[381] *Genius Rewarded,* 28.

[382] Ibid.

This was a trying time for the hot-tempered Singer. He commented that his adversaries would "burn in hell for the perjuries they had committed to deprived him of his rights."[383] He called one of them a "damn scoundrel" and believed that they "were trying to rob him."[384] When a participant in the Howe case died, Singer exclaimed, "It was the providence of God."[385]

The legal litigation was emotionally draining, time consuming, and was whittling away at the finances, not only for the I.M. Singer & Co. but for the other manufacturers as well. The newspapers had sullied everyone's name, making sewing machine manufacturers appear greedy and selfish to the public. According to an 1854 newspaper, "Howe and Singer are raising a perfect din in the papers….It is disgraceful, that when a good thing is given to the world for a common benefit, men are found ready to quarrel over it like brutes, for exclusive possession. The patent system is showing itself to be in every way a nuisance and produces very little besides barbarism."[386] If some agreement was not reached, they all faced financial ruin.

Salvation came when the four biggest manufactures Wheeler & Wilson Co., Grove & Baker Co., Howe, and I.M. Singer and Co., joined together in 1856 to form the Sewing Machine Combination.[387] Between the four companies they owned most of the important patents.[388] They pooled their patents, cross-licensed to one another, and then

---

[383] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 91.

[384] Ibid.

[385] Ibid.

[386] Matters of Mention, *Circular*, April 8, 1854.

[387] Lewton, *The Servant in the House*, 578.

[388] Ibid.

exacted royalties from the others. This concept of pooling or combining patents was the first of its kind and served as a prototype for patent pools or patent thickets which became essential in the automobile, aircraft, and more recently the mobile phone industry.

The fact that Singer was able to work with the other three rival companies speaks of his astuteness as well as the persuasive powers of Clark. Undoubtedly Singer wanted to emerge as the one and only victor in the war; however, he realized that it was not worth the risk to keep fighting. It took a tremendous amount of character to join with his rivals when he believed they were stealing from him. But Singer's decision to sign with the Sewing Machine Combination eventually paid off. The Sewing Machine War was over and Singer could return to whole-heartedly demonstrating and selling his machine.

The road to Singer's success was not easy. He maintained a steadfast determination to develop a working machine, an endless perseverance to promote it, and a doggedness to protect its profits. The rags to riches persona that Singer capitalized on was hard earned.

Singer had truly created a machine that aided women, and the women of the mid-nineteenth century certainly needed help. Gail Collins asserts that visitors were struck by how quickly American women aged, "charming and adorable at fifteen…faded at twenty-three, old at thirty-five, decrepit at forty."[389] She retells a particular visitor's explanation on why American women age so quickly, "No sooner are they married than they begin to lead a life of comparative seclusion, and once mothers, they are buried from the world."[390] The world of seclusion was dominated by child rearing and time consuming domestic duties, especially sewing. Singer's motivation for liberating women from the

[389] Collins, *American Women*, 137-138.

[390] Ibid.

duties of sewing was not because he cared about the woman's plight, he simply saw the woman's hardship as a gateway to wealth. Similarly, he did not hold his relationships with Sponsler or his other mistresses as sacred. He used these women and women in general strictly for his own advantage. Singer's attitude toward women was consistent with other self-made men of his era. G.J. Barker-Benfield claims that nineteenth-century men were focused on making their fortune, they were vastly egoistic about their families, seeing their wife and children as nothing more than a detached portion of themselves.[391]

[391] G.J. Baker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women and Sexuality in 19th. Century America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 5.

## Chapter Four

*International Power and Innovative Ideas*

As Singer continued to barnstorm across America, Clark sent the machine to the 1855 World's Fair in Paris where the Singer machine earned a first place medallion. Under the direction of Clark, the company also started to set up agencies abroad to sell the Singer machine. Prior to this time, goods that were sold overseas were brokered through wholesalers or jobbers. The I.M. Singer & Co. set up thier own agencies in key overseas markets and became "the first American company to report a profit from foreign marketplaces."[392] Paris, Glasgow, Hamburg, and Rio de Janerio were some of the first overseas markets that housed a Singer agency.[393] By 1861, Singer was selling more machines outside the United States than within.[394] This explains why later the Singer Company withstood the American Civil War, 1861-1865. While other companies collapsed under the devastation of a war at home, the Singer Company remained relatively healthy due to the strength of its foreign markets. Singer salesmen carried sewing machines to virtually every inhabited spot on earth including the "Arctic Circle, Africa, South America, the Turkish Empire, Imperial China, and Russia."[395] However, before the company reached these milestones, back in 1861, Singer was remembered as wanting to do away with the blossoming international trade, "My belief is that if we had

[392] Bissell, *The First Conglomerate*, 51.

[393] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 136.

[394] Ibid., 135.

[395] "Singer: A New Product-A New Company," *Singer Yesterday, Today & Tomorrow*, (1988). This is a publication produced by the Singer Company that retells the story of the Singer machine.

never had anything to do with foreign countries and had attended more strictly to that of our own we should be much better off today."[396] It was beneficial for the company that Clark disregarded Singer's beliefs.

Not only did the company have agencies in other countries, in 1867 they started to build factories overseas. They built a mammoth factory in Clydebank, Scotland, followed by factories in Italy, France, Germany, Turkey, and Russia. The Clydebank factory was built to meet the demands of the European markets. Before the turn of the century, the Clydebank factory employed 7,000 workers and produced 13,000 sewing machines a week.[397] The factory dominated Clydebank and its citizens, prompting them to incorporate the image of a Singer sewing machine into their coat of arms. All the foreign factories and agencies were controlled by the parent company in New York and profits were duly sent there as well. It is doubtful that in 1855, when Singer packed his machine to be shipped to Paris for the fair, that he understood that his company was building a foundation for enormous future international success.

Clark is rightly recognized for guiding Singer through the Howe patent suit, the Sewing Machine War, and for promoting the Singer machine in foreign countries. Without Clark's direction, Singer likely would not have navigated as well. During the years 1855 to 1856, Clark also instigated three programs that benefited the company tremendously and can be credited for catapulting the company into unbelievable success. Although, Singer did not necessarily initiate these pioneering achievements he embraced them because they made money, and he was after the dimes. These innovative concepts

[396] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 139.

[397] "Singer Factories—Kilbowie, Clydebank, Scotland," Singersewinginfo.co.uk (2013). http://www.singersewinginfo.co.uk/kilbowie/ (accessed December 29, 2013).

became linked with the Singer machine and; therefore, forever were linked with Singer himself.

The first of the ideas that Clark instigated was to introduce a machine expressly designed for home use. Originally, the Singer machine was designed and marketed to meet the needs of a factory or for the seamstress that was making a living by sewing. It was a bulky and heavy machine, weighing 125 pounds and made of cast-iron.[398] In 1856, the company produced the Turtleback machine, the first machine manufactured expressly for family use.[399] It was smaller and lighter than its predecessor, making it appealing to the home market. Singer reconfigured the machine to sit on a decorative iron stand instead of the wood crate. A brochure proclaims, "we came to the conclusion that the public demanded a sewing machine for family purposes…a machine of smaller size, and of a lighter and more elegant form; a machine decorated in the best style of art, so as to make a beautiful ornament in the parlor or boudoir."[400]

The second concept, the trade-in program, addressed the public's distrust of a working machine. Those who were disenchanted with their current machine were leery of investing in a new machine. When the company offered to trade in a customer's old machine, regardless of make or condition, more people were willing to try a new Singer machine. To help offset the cost of owning a new Singer machine, the company offered a fifty-dollar allowance for the customer's old machine toward the purchase of a new

[398] Hounshell, *American System to Mass Production*, 83.

[399] "Singer First." ; Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 88.

[400] Cooper, *The Sewing Machine*, 34.

Singer machine. The used machines were promptly destroyed, eliminating any hopes of a second hand market.[401]

The third concept that Clark put into place dealt with the fact that a machine sold for a little over one hundred dollars, which was a fifth of the average American's yearly income.[402] The installment buying or rent-to-own program, introduced late in 1856, proved to be one of Clark's most ingenious marketing plans. According to one of their early publications, the company "originated and inaugurated the system of selling sewing machines on the renting or installment plan….This system has been extended by others to the sale of nearly every article of merchandise, from a family Bible to a railway car, and has proved of inestimable benefit to mankind."[403]

The company had gained women's loyalty when Singer showed confidence in a woman's ability to operate a machine. With Clark's rent-to-own program, the company showed that they also had confidence in a woman's ability to be honest and savvy with her money. A woman was trusted to take a machine home with just a small down payment. The company had faith that women would make monthly payments until the machine was paid in full. The rent-to-own program was especially valuable to low-income families and to impoverished countries, both who otherwise did not have the opportunity to own a sewing machine. A Singer historian states, "No company before the Singer Company ever offered easy financing to so much of the world's poor."[404]

---

[401] Bissell, *The First Conglomerate*, 48.

[402] *"The Singer Company Elizabeth "The Great Factory,"* 11.

[403] *The Story of the Sewing Machine 1897,* 20.

[404] Bissell, *The First Conglomerate*, 2.

Clark's idea of rent-to-own, which deferred the price of the machine over several years, allowed many women who otherwise would not have been able to afford it, to own a machine. However, the rent-to-own concept also helped pacify disgruntled husbands. Indisputably, the sewing machine saved time; however, it was not necessarily perceived as having the potential to improve the family's financial situation. Families often had difficulty justifying such an expensive item that would not "reap a harvest" or sufficiently contribute to the household income. A sewing machine's only benefit was that it saved time, and a woman's time was not always considered very valuable. To help overcome this protest, the company claimed with the rent-to-own program a husband could not "accuse her [his wife] of running him into debt since he is merely hiring or renting the machine and under no obligation to buy. Yet at the end of the period of the lease, he would own a sewing machine for the money."[405] Some domestic situations required a woman to be clever; with Singer's rent-to-own program, the company gave a woman the tools to own a sewing machine and keep peace in her family. A *Scientific American* writer at the time comments, "a woman would rather pay $100 for a machine in monthly installments of five dollars than [pay] $50 outright, although able to do so."[406] By taking advantage of the rent-to-own concept, wives gave husbands no reason to complain about the expense of a sewing machine. With this marketing innovation, I.M. Singer & Co. not only taught women that they were trustworthy and were capable of managing finances but also gave them the tools to wisely negotiate domestic situations.

---

[405] *I.M. Singer & Co. Gazette* (1856) quoted in Ruth Brandon, *Singer and the Sewing Machine: A Capitalist Romance*, 117.

[406] Ibid.

Looking back to 1851, the long-term survival of the company looked bleak, regardless of the fact that they had a machine that, according to the *Scientific American*, "does good work."[407] They were facing years of litigation with Howe as well as the financial and emotion costs of the Sewing Machine War. As the fate of both the company and Singer hung in the balance, Clark emerged as a brilliant entrepreneur. Clark wisely maneuvered Singer through the war to find a workable solution in the Sewing Machine Combination. He helped Singer claim the prize in Paris, which then activated the company's expansion into foreign markets. Clark also proved to be a marketing genius with the made-for-home sewing machines, trade-in allowances, and the rent-to-own programs. The number of machines produced over the next five years indicates that the combination of Singer's talents and Clark's genius was a success. In 1855, the company produced 883 machines, in 1856, they produced 2,564, but just four years later, in 1860, they produced 13,000.[408] As much as Singer truly despised Clark, he had to admit that without him, he possibly could have fallen back into the destitution that he had known much of his life. However, with Clark, the company began to emerge as the world's largest maker of sewing machines, and Singer emerged as a wealthy industrialist.[409]

*Wealth, Confessions, and Divorce*

With his newfound wealth, Singer, in 1859, was able to move Sponsler and their family to the prestigious address of 14 Fifth Avenue, just off Washington Square in New

[407]"Singer's Sewing Machine," *Scientific American* Volume VII number 7 (November 1, 1851): 1.

[408] Hounshell, *American System to Mass Production*, 89.

[409] Bissell, *The First Conglomerate*, 18.

York City.[410] When Singer first came to New York City he was allocated to live in the filthy and crime-ridden tenements because he could not afford better. Those who could afford better lived uptown and away from the noise, congestion, crowds, and dirt of the inner city. Singer could afford to move into New York City's most elite residential zone between Second and Sixth Avenues.[411]

Although the Singer's house was at an affluent address, they were not at home with their prosperous neighbors. More than just a common address connected the wealthy of New York. They were linked by marital ties; the rich married the rich, by business connections; the rich formed partnerships with the rich, and by social ties; the rich vacationed and partied with the rich. They often shared the same education, religion, culture, and politics. While the wealthy had received their diplomas from Columbia College; Singer had received only a minimal education in the Rochester's common schools. The wealthy paid 1,400 dollars for a pew at fashionable churches like the New York Trinity Episcopal Church; Singer was godless.[412] Singer was not like the bank-rich James Brown who married the land-rich daughter of the Post family; Singer had not even married the women he had lived with for the past twenty-three years.[413] Although Fifth Avenue society might admire Singer's rags-to-riches persona, they did not want him living in their neighborhoods, attending their parties, or socializing with their families. The New York City's blue-blooded families did not welcome Singer, he was a nouveau-

[410] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 147.

[411] Spann, *The New Metropolis*, 212.

[412] Ibid., 213.

[413] Ibid.

riche upstart, who had acquired his money during his own generation and lacked the decorum associated with generations of old money.

Singer further alienated himself from society by using his newfound wealth in ostentatious and vulgar ways. He had endured much poverty and hardship during his forty-eight years and now he was spending his money in an opulent manner. He enrolled his children in high-priced schools and hired excellent music tutors.[414] A live-in physician was employed to care for the family's personal needs.[415] Sponsler started shopping at expensive stores like Lord and Taylor, and Stewart; signing Mrs. Isaac Singer for her purchases.[416] She bought items to decorate their five-story home, items they previously never could have afforded such as expensive pictures, elegant carpets, a grand piano, and ornate furniture.[417] A New York home historian comments, "Owners of these homes did not strive for individual expression in furnishing their parlors. They were more concerned with keeping in step with those of their social class and were not in the least embarrassed about copying their neighbors."[418] Singer and Sponsler were not social equals with their neighbors, but that did not stop them from copying them.

Like other Fifth Avenue residences, the Singers opened their parlors, to show off their wealth. The Singers were renowned for their lavish parties including a masquerade surprise party and a fancy costume ball. Guests feasted on soup from a tureen, fish, four plates of game, roasts, fowl or ham, dishes of vegetables, dessert puddings, pies, tarts,

---

[414] Bissell, *The First Conglomerate,* 19.

[415] Ibid.

[416] "A Millionaire's Wives," *Atlanta Constitution, November 5, 1875.*

[417] Kahan, *Music Modern Muse,* 7.

[418] Knapp, *An Old Merchant's House,* 36.

fruits, and nuts all served on a mahogany table with white linen cloths and folded napkins.[419] These lavish meals stood in sharp contrast to Zieber's recollections of eating from a common stew pot while being a guest at Singer's table in the tenements.

Even though Zieber and Singer's partnership had ended poorly, he was recorded as attending the Singers' parties. He was pleased to find that Sponsler and all the children were very kind to him; however, he did not find much pleasure in being in their home with its wealthy furnishings while he was still so very poor.[420] Other Singer guests included Edwin Dean, the father of the renowned actor, Julia Dean.[421] Dean had been an actor, theater manager, and had overseen his daughter's career. Singer, being a thespian himself, certainly relished having Dean as a guest. The names of their neighbors were not listed as attending the Singers' parties.[422] The wealthy society did not want to socialize with the garrulous and callous industrialist.[423] Clark's wife, the daughter of New York state attorney general, shared these sentiments. Although her husband was in business with Singer, she did not acknowledge the socially inferior Singer family. She so despised Singer that she refused to allow him into her home and repeatedly encouraged Clark to break the partnership with the hot-tempered, arrogant, and habitually profane Singer.[424] Although the neighbors and the Clarks did not attend the Singer's parties,

---

[419] Knapp, *An Old Merchant's House*, 139-140.

[420] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 146.

[421] Ibid., 148.

[422] Ibid.

[423] Bissell, *The First Conglomerate*, 19.

[424] Lyon, Peter, "Isaac Singer and His Wonderful Sewing Machine," *American Heritage, October 1958.*

there were plenty of guests on New Year's Day when the front doors were opened to the Singer factory workers.[425]

Singer displayed his nouveau-riche wealth with expensive purchases and elaborate parties; however, the best example of Singer's ostentatious spending habits was found in the carriage house adjacent to the Singer's palatial house. It held horses, multiple carriages, and the famous Singer family coach. Singer and Sponsler in their Merritt Players days had traveled in a one-horse wagon. Now they had six carriages and ten horses; one carriage large enough to contain a lady's dressing room.[426] Singer, much to Clark's chagrin, enjoyed racing a "unicorn team," three horses, followed by two, up and down Broadway.[427] Like many wealthy families, the Singer clan also participated in more peaceful carriage rides in the first urban landscaped park in the United States, Central Park. By building the park, New Yorkers had hoped to disprove European's belief that American society was unsettled, egotistical, and did not address the welfare of its inhabitants.[428] The newly constructed park with its romantic paths, lovely gardens, and beautiful ponds that froze for wintertime ice skating was intended to provide the working class with a healthy alternative to the saloon. However, since the park was located too far uptown for the working population to walk, Central Park became primarily the playground of the wealthy. Despite its lofty objectives, Central Park had

[425] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 143.

[426] Kobler, "Mr. Singer's Money Machine."

[427] *New York Family Herald*, June 22, 1859, quoted in Ruth Brandon, *Singer and the Sewing Machine: A Capitalist Romance* (New York: Kodansha International, 1977), 157.

[428] Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park*, (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1992), 23.

become a fashionable promenade for people like Singer to show off their carriages, their steeds, and themselves.[429]

Singer constructed a carriage for his family that was guaranteed to capture the attention of the park's spectators. The *Scientific American* claimed that the Singer wagon was fashioned "after the style of a Russian nobleman's equipage."[430] Singer's monstrous, patented, 3,800-pound carriage accommodated his large family, friends, servants, and musicians, having seating for thirty-one people.[431] This contraption was drawn by nine crème colored horses, three abreast; it was painted canary yellow edged with black; and provided seats on the outside to accommodate a small band of musicians.[432] Later, as adults, the Singer children commented that their father had taken special care to design the carriage especially for the younger children. They remembered that the seats could be folded to form a child's bed and that an area was designed to create ample room for the children to play.[433] A Singer historian records, "Even New Yorkers accustomed to affluent displays must have gazed in awe at the brilliant yellow with glossy-black trim, nine horse-powered galleon as it lurched down crowded city streets on a lazy Sunday afternoon. The magnificent wagon made clear to all—Isaac Merritt Singer had arrived."[434]

---

[429] Spann, *The New Metropolis*, 167.

[430] *Scientific American*, quoted in Ruth Brandon, *Singer and the Sewing Machine: A Capitalist Romance* (New York: Kodansha International, 1977), 156.

[431] Kahan, *Music Modern Muse,* 4.

[432] *New York Herald*, December 5, 1859, quoted in Ruth Brandon, *Singer and the Sewing Machine: A Capitalist Romance* (New York: Kodansha International, 1977), 156.

[433] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance,* 155.

[434] Bissell, *The First Conglomerate*, 18.

As Singer's wealth grew, so did his family. While living in their Fifth Avenue home, Singer and Sponsler had two more children; a girl, Julia Ann Singer, named after the Julia Ana that had died in infancy, and then a year later, in 1857, another daughter, Caroline Virginia Singer, was born. Giving a child the name of a sibling that had passed away early in life was not a peculiarity of the Singers; it was a common practice in nineteen-century America.[435]

Possibly the birth of two more children prompted Singer to finally divorce Catherine Singer, his legal wife of thirty years. This seemingly random act in 1860 might have to do with his growing family or possibly a desire to appear more respectable in his new role in society. However, most likely, it had been at the request of Clark in order to maintain the company's good name. Open adultery in a company's hierarchy was not looked upon favorably in proper Victorian society. Whatever the motivation, Catherine Singer was offered a sum of 10,000 dollars if she would agree to confess to adultery and divorce Singer.[436] Catherine Singer was currently cohabitating with a man, Stephen Kent; therefore, technically, committing adultery. The fact that Singer had and was currently committing adultery with Sponsler was not the issue at hand. Adultery was still the only grounds for divorce in New York; the laws had not changed since Singer's mother divorced his father thirty-nine years ago. The lawyers convinced Catherine Singer that the new sewing machine company was in decline and it was in her best interest to take the money now while it was available. Catherine Singer apparently believed the lie because she took the money, leaving Singer legally single and free to

[435] Donna Przecha, "The Importance of Given Names."

[436] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance,* 158.

marry Sponsler. Sponsler had waited twenty-five years for the moment when Singer was able to fulfill his promise to marry her. Now that Singer had the legal freedom to wed Sponsler, he claimed that he would never marry her because if he did "she would have him in her power."[437] Sponsler had lived more than half her life with Singer, she had stood by him when they lived "in search of daily bread."[438] She had been with him through the worst and now when things were better, and he had the opportunity to fulfill his promise, he chose not to. There are no records to express how Sponsler felt at this revelation, most likely she was devastated.

An incident that shines light on how Sponsler handled Singer's rejection occurred seven months after the divorce from Catherine Singer. On a summer day in August 1860, Sponsler was riding in her carriage on Fifth Avenue. To her dismay, she spotted Singer and Mary McGonigal riding alone in Singer's open carriage.[439] This certainly was not the first time Sponsler had seen Singer with other women. He had been reported to have led a very "fast life" and was "frequently seen in company with women who Miss Mary Ann Sponsler's friends' were not acquainted."[440] However, this time Sponsler began screeching at the oncoming carriage; later people recalled that everyone on Fifth Avenue heard her rants.[441]

---

[437] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance,* 161.

[438] *In the Matter of the Probate of the Last Will and Testament of Isaac M. Singer,10*.

[439] *St Louis Globe-Democrat*, September 16, 1887.

[440] Ibid.

[441] "A Millionaire's Wives," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 5, 1875.

The story continued, asserting that when Singer returned home, he severely beat Sponsler for her behavior in the park.[442] Sponsler was not surprised by Singer's violence. She recounts that Singer had "repeatedly beaten and choked her to insensibility, frequently forcing the blood to flow in streams from her nose, mouth, face, head and neck."[443] At one such beating, when their daughter, Voulettie Singer, tried to intervene, Singer struck her unconscious. The doctor ordered both women confined to their beds for several days after this event.[444] The current thrashing, according to Sponsler, was a "brutal and bloody assault" and this time she retaliated by having Singer arrested.[445] Singer's violence and arrest quickly became headlines. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly,* which was read by half a million people, led with the story of the great sewing machine manufacturer's troubles.[446] The forty-nine year old Singer responded to the negative publicity by fleeing for Europe on 19 September 1860, accompanied by his buggy companion McGonigal's nineteen-year-old sister, Kate McGonigal.[447]

When Singer arrived in Europe, he resided near Cheapside, England, where the company had previously established an office.[448] While abroad, he revealed that "he had been living with two other women in New York City who thought themselves his only companion at the same time that he was getting his divorce from his first wife and calling

---

[442] "A Millionaire's Wives," *Atlanta Constitution,* November 5, 1875.

[443] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance,* 169.

[444] Ibid., 162.

[445] Ibid.

[446] *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly,* quoted in Ruth Brandon, *Singer and the Sewing Machine: A Capitalist Romance* (New York: Kodansha International, 1977), 162.

[447] Bissell, *The First Conglomerate,* 20.

[448] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance,* 163.

Mary Ann Sponsler his second one."[449] The secret life of Singer began to unravel and become fodder for the tabloids. Mary McGonigal, who had been riding in the carriage with Singer, was not a short-term romance. She had borne him five children over the past nine years, one child in 1852, 1854, 1856, 1858, and in 1859.[450] Their first child, Ruth McGonigal, was possibly named after Singer's mother, Ruth Benson. Their latest child, Charles Alexander, shared the same name as the child that Singer and Sponsler had lost in early childhood a few years prior. Singer and Mary McGonigal lived together as Mr. and Mrs. Matthews at No 70 Christopher Street in New York City. At one point McGonigal's little sister, Kate McGonigal, lived with them. The younger McGonigal appeared to have replaced her elder sister, because she was now Singer's companion to Europe, traveling as the lady accompanying Mr. Simmons—Simmons being Singer's latest alias.[451]

Singer also admitted to a relationship with Mary Walter, who, while cohabitating introduced themselves as Mrs. and Mr. Merritt. Merritt was the surname Singer had used in the early years when he and Sponsler performed in their theatrical troupe, the Merritt Players. The Singer and Walter-Merritt relationship resulted in just one child fathered by Singer. They lived with their daughter, Alice Merritt, in Lower Manhattan. By 1860, Singer admitted to fathering eighteen children, sixteen of which were still alive, with four different women. He confessed to simultaneously being the head of three households—Sponsler's, McGonigal's, and Walter-Merritt's. In addition to these women, Singer was

[449] *St Louis Globe-Democrat*, September 16, 1887.

[450] Bissell, *The First Conglomerate*, 19.

[451] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 163.

accused of having dalliances with Mrs. Judson who worked in the Chicago business office of I.M. Singer & Co., and with Ellen Brazee and Ellen Livingston, both with whom he had illegitimate children.[452] It was suggested that the women used in the promotional advertising were in fact Singer employees who had been seduced by him and had "fallen victim to his brutal lust."[453] Clark, who was the epitome of respect and propriety, wrote to Singer:

> I hardly dare speak to any old friends when I meet them in the streets. The firm of which I am the active manager has been publicly accused of keeping numerous agents in various cities to procure women for you to prostitute. And although this is an infamous falsehood, yet it is mixed up with so much truth that it would be disgraceful to bring into light of a public trial, that neither I, who am most injured in money and reputation, nor the agents at the branch offices who are outrageously slandered, dare to appeal.[454]

Zieber had at once grumbled that "Singer took at least three times as much" money from the firm as he did.[455] Zieber's grievance is supported by the fact that Singer needed extra money to maintain three separate households, as well as fund relationships with several other women.

Sponsler never walked down the aisle with Singer but she was considered his common law wife. She was able to convince a court of this claim based not on the

[452] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance,* 169.

[453] Ibid., 170.

[454] Ibid., 163.

[455] Ibid., 164.

twenty-five years she had lived with him but because of the seven months that they cohabitated after he divorced Catherine Singer and before the buggy incident. She sought divorce on the grounds of adultery, citing not only his cheating ways but also his habitual abuse.[456] She was awarded 8,000 dollars a year in alimony, at the time the largest sum ever obtained.[457] However, she was never paid the money; she and Singer agreed to another arrangement in which she was paid 50.00 dollars a week and was set up in a pleasant home at 189 West Twenty-Eight Street.[458] It is important to note that she was never legally granted a divorce from Singer, only a settlement—technically she was still his common law wife. Within a month of the settlement, Sponsler secretly married John E. Foster. Six months after the clandestine ceremony, Sponsler took a dangerous fall. Believing she was dying, she confessed her marriage to her married daughter, Violettie Theresa Singer Proctor. Her daughter told her husband, William Proctor, who was an officer in I.M. Singer and Co. Singer, learning of the marriage between Sponsler and Foster, filed for divorce from Sponsler claiming that she was a bigamist--being both Singer's common law wife and Foster's wedded wife. Sponsler, in an odd twist of events, lost her weekly allowance, her house, and was branded the adulteress in her relationship with Singer. Singer's divorce from Catherine Singer, his momentous buggy ride and arrest, his confession of multiple affairs, his legal woes with his common law wife, and Sponsler's surreptitious marriage provided sensational headlines for the newspapers in 1860.

---

[456] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 169.

[457] "Singer's Widows."

[458] Ibid.

*A New Company and Civil War*

The tabloids' recordings of Singer's personal affairs whittled at the image of the I.M. Singer & Co. that Clark had so diligently tried to create during the Howe infringement case. Having a bigamist who was arrested for beating his common law wife and daughter, and then fleeing the country with his nineteen-year-old mistress was not the type of person a company whose primary clientele was women wanted at the helm. Clark was again relied upon to protect the company's health. Singer had escaped to Europe, leaving Clark to address the scandal and to keep the company running. However, even before Singer left, his intensity for the business's welfare had begun to wane. It is possible that the years of heated litigation had quelled Singer's ambitions. In addition, he was now a very wealthy man and was not as compelled to work as he was when striving to feed and clothe his family. Finally, Singer seemed to be satisfied with his invention; he had not patented any new improvements on his machine since 1859. Considering these observations, in addition to the simple logistics of caring for and maintaining multiple households, it is not surprising that Singer lost his one-time vigor for the business. In a note from Singer to Clark, Singer expressed that "his private affairs hung heavily on him," and he requested that Clark try "to make his load of grief as light as possible."[459]

Clark decided that the best way to lighten the load of grief for both he and Singer was to dissolve the partnership. Clark began the process of converting the I.M. Singer & Co. partnership into a corporation, the Singer Manufacturing Company. Even though Singer did not want to be burdened with the company, he did not want to relinquish all

[459] Kobler, "Mr. Singer's Money Machine."

the control to Clark. It was agreed that neither partner could be president while the other was alive. The partners shared equally in the profits, and Singer was absolved of active management. In 1863, the business legally changed to a corporation under New York law and was safe from the possibility of future litigation from any of Singer's multiple disgruntled companions and their children.[460]

While Clark was dealing with the damages from Singer's personal transgressions, and working diligently to convert the partnership into a corporation, civil war broke out in America. Over the preceding years, tensions had been brewing between the Northern and Southern states. Singer had witnessed the country's divided turmoil over runaway slaves while living in Boston. Slavery was one of the central issues that divided the country; the other major issues centered on states' rights versus federal authority, and westward expansion. When Abraham Lincoln, a perceived northern sympathizer and a Republican who opposed expansion of slavery, was elected president in 1860, South Carolina showed its disapproval by seceding from the Union. Within two months, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas also seceded and joined together to form The Confederate States of America. When the Confederates fired upon Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina, Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to reclaim federal property. Prior to the 1861 call for troops, there were seventy-four manufacturers of sewing machines in the states that remained in the Union and none in the newly formed Confederate States.[461] Although, the North possessed the industrial

[460] Kahan, *Music Modern Muse*, 9.

[461] Amy Breakwell, "A Nation in Extremity: Sewing Machines and the American Civil War," *Textile History and the Military* 41 (May 2010): 99.

power, the Union was not equipped to provide supplies for the enlisted men.[462] The I.M. Singer & Co., which was in the process of becoming the Singer Manufacturing Company, stepped forward to help supply the demands of the Union's new recruits, donating one thousand sewing machines.[463] In 1861, Brooks Brothers who had been contracted by the Federal government relied on four hundred Singer machines to produce Union uniforms.[464] A sewing machine sewed almost twenty times faster than a woman sewing by hand; therefore, the Singer machine was able to outfit Grant's army faster than the hand sewing Southern women were able to outfit Lee's army. To show support for the Union, Clark approved a float for a New York parade, which featured young ladies operating the Singer machine along with one thousand men who were employees of the company.[465] The Civil War played an important role in the future success of the sewing machine industry. A Civil War historian states, "The adoption of sewing machines into the garment industry for military clothing enabled the machine to firmly establish a permanent presence in United States manufacturing."[466]

As the country went to war, they became more reliant on sewing machines and on the women that operated them. According to Evans, women threw themselves into the war effort. As a result of the war, women played vital roles in economic venues that had never before been available to them. "They were prepared to claim new liberties in a

[462] Breakwell, "A Nation in Extremity," 99.

[463] Kahan, *Music Modern Muse,* 7.

[464] Richard Billies, "Brooks Brothers and Singer Sewing Machines," North against South, http://northagainstsouth.com/brooks-brothers-and-singer-sewing-machines/ (accessed December 31, 2013).

[465] Ibid.

[466] Breakwell, "A Nation in Extremity," 105.

postwar world whose politics had been reshaped," according to Evans.[467] Drew Gilpin Faust asserts that there was an "abandonment of prewar beliefs in the nobility of dependence and helplessness in women."[468] Faust concludes that after the war, women would never be the same.[469]

Wartime was difficult for Clark, he felt obligated to give generously to the war effort because the company, thanks to Singer's antics, was perceived as being very wealthy. Clark wrote Singer, "I am suffering for all the large public show of wealth you made in 1859 and 60 [*sic*]. It was industriously spread abroad that the firm was rich. Now all who are rich are expected to be patriotic and to give liberally."[470] Although the company was perceived as wealthy, in 1862, Clark described the company's wartime condition, "we are scudding along under just as close sails as we possibly can and we trust to come through all right."[471] America was reeling from the horrors of the Civil War, Clark was supporting the Union, keeping the company sound by expanding international trade and restructuring the company, and Singer was gaily falling in love in Paris.

[467] Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 113.

[468] Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention* (Chapel Hill: University of North Caroline Press, 1996), 482.

[469] Ibid., 479.

[470] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance,* 157.

[471] Ibid., 138.

## Chapter Five

*Paris, Love, and Return to America*

The American Civil War was still raging while Singer became smitten by a Paris proprietor's intelligent, high-spirited, and beautiful daughter. The fate of the relationship with his young traveling companion, Kate McGonigal, is unknown; her name drops out of the tabloids shortly after arriving in Europe. Singer observed the legal hearings with the "adulteress" Sponsler at a safe distance away in Europe. However, he did return to the United States in time to see the Sponsler divorce finalized, his partnership with Clark dissolved, and to marry his latest love interest, the proprietor's daughter, Isabelle Eugenie Boyce Summerville. On 13 June 1863, seven weeks after the Sponsler divorce was finalized, the fifty-two-year old Singer married a very young and pregnant Summerville. The wedding was officiated by the Rector of the St. John Episcopal Church in New York.[472] This was the "first and last time Singer was in church" pronounced Sponsler.[473] Two of the witnesses to the union were Singer's oldest children, Gus Singer and Violettie Theresa Singer Proctor. The newly acquired stepchildren were more "like brothers and sisters" wrote the newlywed to her mother.[474] The bride was in her early twenties, of French and English-Scott decent, and had recently obtained a divorce from Mr.

[472] Kahan, *Music Modern Muse*, 9.

[473] *In the Matter of the Probate of the Last Will and Testament of Isaac M. Singer*.

[474] Kahan, *Music Modern Muse*, 8.

Summerville.[475] According to letters to her mother, Summerville had left a daughter, Emily Summerville, in Europe when she set sail for America to become the newest Mrs. Singer.[476]

After the wedding, the couple lived for a short time in the mansion at 14 Fifth Avenue where their first child, Adam Mortimer Singer, was born.[477] Isabelle Singer appeared to be pleased with the stylishly furnished parlors, the elegant clothing, and the wedding ring that was "so thick it will never wear out."[478] She called Singer, "Pappy," and wrote that she had a dear, kind, honorable, cleaver, and loving father and husband.[479]

New York City society was on the cusp of change when Singer and his new wife arrived at their Fifth Avenue home in 1863. When Singer first purchased this fashionable address in 1859, neighbors such as William and Caroline Astor shunned his party invitations. Antebellum society in New York City was rigidly exclusionary, and Singer being the epitome of a gaudy nouveau-riche upstart was excluded from his neighbors' spheres. However, after the Civil War, society became more accepting of upstarts whose families did not have a pedigree. Immigrants such as Andrew Carnegie who had started to amass fortunes in the 1860s began purchasing real estate at prestigious New York addresses. They were known for their charm, literary knowledge, business sense, upstanding moral life, and their unstinting support of the Union. They built enormous homes filling them with ornate furniture, rare paintings, and other costly objects. They

[475] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance,* 175.

[476] Kahan, *Music Modern Muse,* 8.

[477] Ibid., 7.

[478] Ibid., 9.

[479] Ibid.

paraded in Central Park in decorative carriages and hosted elaborate fetes and balls. As the country ushered in the Gilded Age, Carnegie as well as others that had gained incredible wealth through mining, railroads, and industry were reluctantly accepted into New York society. The families that had inherited their money began to slowly include the families that had made their money into their elite circle. Mrs. Astor's Four Hundred was a list that represented 400 people that constituted fashionable New York society—a list of who was acceptable and who was not. The list reluctantly began to incorporate families who had earned their money. Singer left New York before the famous list was composed, but if he had stayed in his Fifth Avenue residence, his name would not have appeared on the list. What Singer lacked was something that money could not buy. The nouveau-riche upstarts that made the list were careful to maintain a level of decorum that escaped Singer. Singer with his multiple affairs, messy divorces, explosive temper, and very young wife, not to mention his garish yellow carriage, did not adhere to even the more lenient rules of the Gilded Age. According to an editorial, Singer's peculiar social relations were notorious in the Eastern cities and were habitual topic of public conversation. Although other nouveau-rich upstarts were accepted in New York City society, the Singer family with a new Mrs. Singer continued to be scorned.[480]

While living in his Fifth Avenue home, Singer was approached by Catherine Singer, the wife that he thought he had forever dispatched three years ago. Catherine Singer, realizing that she had been tricked with the "take the 10,000 dollars now because the company is failing" ruse started new legal proceedings in 1863.[481] Certainly, since

[480] Editorial, *Daily Arkansas Gazette*, October 30, 1875.

[481] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance, 176.*

she had legally been Singer's wife, she was entitled to something similar to the 8,000 dollar a year sum that Sponsler had been awarded. Singer went to visit his and Catherine's oldest son, William, at the Singer factory where he worked. Singer requested that his son testify for him in court against his mother. William begged to stay neutral in the matter. The decision did not set well with Singer, who then tried to bribe William with the promise of money and a furnished home; "Take your choice, your mother with poverty or me with riches."[482] William still was not willing to perjure himself in a courtroom; Singer responded by calling his son the "wickedest of men and the silliest of fools."[483] Singer continued his tirade by threatening to murder William. Unquestionably, Singer's threats and money had encouraged someone, although not William Singer, to squelch the proceeding because the case was not continued.

In the spring of 1864, Singer and his wife, Isabelle Singer, left city life to build a home north of New York City in Yonkers.[484] The Castle, their new home, resided on a hundred acres of parkland overlooking the Hudson River.[485] The 50,000-dollar home with its up-to-date appliances and new coal furnace provided Isabelle Singer with the life of luxury she had longed for.[486] A daughter, Winnaretta Eugenie Singer, was born at the Castle in January 1865. She later recalled that "The Castle boasted room after room filled with the most elegant and costly furnishings that money could buy. A battalion of servants bustled through the house, attending to the needs of family members and guests.

---

[482] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance, 176.*

[483] Ibid.

[484] Kahan, *Music Modern Muse*, 10.

[485] Ibid.

[486] Ibid., 8.

The large stable contained, in addition to horses and sleighs, a canary-yellow carriage that could transport thirty-one people."[487] Two of Singer's youngest children with Sponsler, Julia Ann Singer and Caroline Virginia Singer, joined their father at the new country estate.[488] Singer had retained custody of the two young girls after the divorce. The Singers invited hundreds to a house warming party at their enormous solid granite Castle; however, the residents of Yonkers ignored the invitation, and "Singer's old associates no longer clung to him."[489] The party's low attendance signaled that society still frowned upon Singer's complicated family affairs and gauche ways; proper society had not accepted Singer in the city or the country.[490]

Society's rejection appears to have concerned Singer as he advanced in age. In his fifties, he joined the Episcopal Church and was reported to have attended services faithfully, dedicated himself to good works, and no longer "dallied along primrose paths."[491] Possibly this was the awakening of the long dormant seeds planted while living in the burnt-over district, or maybe his young wife had tamed his wild heart, or it might have been an attempt to appear more acceptable to society. Someone with personal knowledge of Singer claims that only a person who stood in line to receive part

[487] "The Singer Will," The New York Herald, November 18, 1875 quoted in Sylvia Kahan, *Music Modern Muse: A Life of Winnaretta Singer Princesse de Poligna*, 6.

[488] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance,* 183.

[489] "Singer's Varied Wedlock," *The Sun*, July 1, 1878, quoted in Sylvia Kahan, *Music Modern Muse: A Life of Winnaretta Singer Princesse de Poligna*, 10.

[490] "Singer's Widows."

[491] Kobler, "Mr. Singer's Money Machine."

of the Singer fortune would write that Singer sustained a good reputation, was a church member, gave liberally to religious enterprises, or was esteemed as a moral man.[492]

*Europe, Happiness, and Death*

The Singers were living at The Castle when the Civil War came to an end and America faced a period of reconstruction. However, the Singers did not stay in America during this time of rebuilding and restoring of the Union. In 1866, the couple and their children set sail for Paris on the iron ship *The Great Eastern.*[493] During the voyage their third child, Washington Merritt Grant Singer, was born. A year later in 1867, while living in Paris, another son was born to the Singers. This son, Paris Eugene Singer, was named after the city of his birth.

The middle-aged Singer and the young Isabelle Singer had two more children, Isabelle Blanche Singer born in 1869, and Franklin Morse Singer born in 1870. The birth of their last child corresponded with the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War. To avoid the impending siege and the eventual fall of Paris, Singer, his wife, and their six children left Paris and sought refuge in England. One of the children remembers traveling out of France at a snail's pace. For fear that the advancing German armies might have destroyed the train tracks, a man was sent to walk in front of the train to ensure the tracks were still intact; therefore, slowing their progress greatly.[494] The Singer family eventually made it safely to England, temporarily staying in London. For the sake of

[492] "Apropos of Isaac M. Singer," *Daily Arkansas Gazette,* October 30, 1875.

[493] Eastley, *The Singer Saga*, 29.

[494] Ibid., 27.

Isabelle Singer's health, she was recovering from childbirth, they decided to look for a home with a more agreeable climate.

In 1871, Singer purchased a twenty-acre estate in Paighton, England near the beach resort town of Torquay. He spared no expense to construct another castle, complete with a theater, riding hall, banqueting hall, and all the conveniences his money could buy.[495] The four story, one hundred room mansion contained acres of marble and floor to ceiling murals. The rotunda, which sat adjacent to the house, was used to host private theatrical performances, puppet shows, children's parties, and provided a stage for the circus. The rotunda's wooden floor could be removed in the winter months to provide a covered exercise area for the horses. The grounds featured waterfalls that cascaded over cave-like rocks into a pool as well as rare sub-tropical plants and shrubs.[496] It took over three years to build, cost approximately a half million dollars, and Singer christened it the Wigwam. Although Singer lived miles away from his birthplace, he was still an American and he wanted his home to have an American name. William Singer wrote, "That is why he [Singer] named his Paighton home 'The Wigwam' an Indian name for home."[497] However, given Singer's personality, it is possible that he gave his mammoth home the modest name Wigwam for its theatrical appeal.

From all accounts, Singer seemed to be happy at the Wigwam. His entire life he had wanted to perform on the stage, but to no real avail. When he built his Wigwam he now owned the stage and no one could force him from pursuing his lifelong love. He

---

[495] "Singer and His Families," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat,* September 16, 1887.

[496] Cawson, *Oldway Mansion.*

[497] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance,* 187.

shared his admiration of the theater with his wife and children. His children fondly remember growing up in a splendid, fantastic world, in which performances and entertainment were part of their daily lives. Two of Singer's children, Alice Walter-Merritt and Caroline Virginia Singer, sailed to Europe to collaborate with Isabelle Singer's children for Singer's sixty-second birthday celebration. Singer certainly was delighted as his children preformed scenes from Shakespeare, sang popular songs, and enacted a comic opera. Adding to the house's pleasant atmosphere was Singer's wife, who brought charm and music to the home. She filled the salon with song and operatic arias that either she sang superbly or were performed by other members of the family or local musicians.[498]

Singer not only found happiness at the Wigwam but also acceptance. He had a stage that no one could take away, his family was around him, and finally he had found admiration and respect from the community; something that had eluded him in America. The fact that his newfound veneration was purchased, not earned, did not dampen Singer's disposition. Initially, the Singers received a similar reception as they had in New York City and Yonkers. A local newspaper writes, "He [Singer] tried to get into society by giving a grand ball to which all the aristocracy of the neighborhood were invited. But they mercilessly snubbed him, and in revenge he asked all the tradesmen of the place, and gave them an entertainment the like of which for magnificence has hardly ever been seen in England."[499] Apparently, Singer's previous debauchery or his "machine made" money did not hinder the common locals or hordes of workers, who he

[498] Kahan, *Music Modern Muse,* 7.

[499] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance,* 190.

compensated handsomely for their talents, from attending the Singer's balls, concerts, and holiday parties. Singer provided a grand celebration for three special days every year, Christmas Day, the Fourth of July, and his October birthday. One holiday guest described Singer as a handsome old gentleman of medium height with a white 'Father Christmas' square cut beard.[500] He gave out meat and other provisions to the poor of the region, then passed out toys to the town's children, and finally invited the Paighton townspeople to the Wigwam to celebrate the season. Because Singer was frequently cold, possibly due to his advancing age or simply being unaccustomed to the English sea air, he wore a colorful variety of fancy velvet-lined satin overcoats (Figure 3).[501] Visitors remember their host in his striking immaculate overcoats welcoming them to lavish garden parties and balls given at the Wigwam.[502]

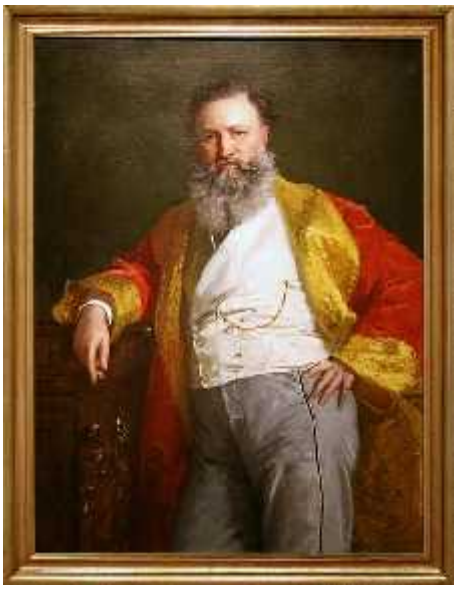

Figure 3. Isaac Merritt Singer

[500] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance,* 189.

[501] Ibid.

[502] Ibid.

Before the Wigwam was completed, the Singers hosted a wedding for Alice Walter-Merritt, an offspring from the liaison between Singer and Mary Walter-Merritt. The wedding had been postponed because Singer had caught a chill and was in pain from "an affection of the heart and inflammation of the windpipe."[503] Two months later, the still suffering Singer was able to attend the wedding on 14 July 1875 but was not able to walk his daughter down the aisle. Although Singer was ailing, he retained his handsome looks, well-trimmed flowing beard, and in his silk robes, he reigned as a loving patriarchal figure at his daughter's wedding.[504] The bride took her vows attired in heavy white satin trimmed with Brussels lace and orange flowers. Enhancing her bridal ensemble was the set of diamonds, a lavish wedding gift from her father.[505]

Ten days after his daughter's wedding, on 24 July 1875, at age, sixty-three, Singer succumbed to heart disease.[506] His suffering had become so severe that he prayed for death.[507] Singer's body was dressed in a white satin waistcoat, black coat and trousers, and white gloves. Inside the innermost of three coffins, he laid shrouded in white satin and Maltese lace.[508] Two thousand mourners attended his funeral, the cortege extending almost a mile long to the Torquay cemetery. Next to the cemetery's Anglican chapel, a large white marble mausoleum marked his grave. On the day of the funeral, the town

[503] Eastley, *The Singer Saga*, 36.

[504] Ibid.

[505] Ibid.

[506] Kahan, *Music Modern Muse*, 15.

[507] Ibid.

[508] Eastley, *The Singer Saga*, 36.

closed their stores, flew their flags at half-staff, and tolled the church bell.[509] The Company's American offices and factories observed Singer's passing by closing for the day. Clark, the only partner that Singer did not or could not discard, lamented that he "sincerely deplored the loss of this distinguished inventor."[510]

As Singer was laid to rest, a firestorm began to brew over his will. Singer had acquired a wealth valued at up to 18,000,000 dollars.[511] "When the old sinner died he left…one wife and two ex-wives of the legitimate variety and Lord knows how many more of the brevet [a non-hereditary form of French nobility—a bastard] variety."[512] Possibly foreseeing the problems caused by having so many relationships and heirs, Singer had prepared a will five years earlier in 1870. The will was ferociously contested but withstood the scrutiny. Singer had provided for his family by dividing his fortune into sixty equal parts, each including shares in the Singer Manufacturing Company stock as well as cash or bonds.[513] Isabelle Singer received the largest percentage of the inheritance and twenty-one of the twenty-two living children received varying portions. Isabelle Singer's male children, Adam Mortimer, Washington, Paris, and Franklin received six parts each. The two female children, Winnaretta and Isabelle Blanche, received five parts each. Eleven-year-old Winnaetta's portion of the inheritance was worth approximately 900,000 dollars. The very wealthy heiress was devastated by the

[509] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance,* 194.

[510] Kobler, "Mr. Singer's Money Machine."

[511] "A Millionaire's Wives," *The Atlanta Constitution,* November 5, 1875.

[512] *Advance,* 1889, quoted in Graham Forsdyke, "Bluebeard Isaac Merritt Singer," ISMACS News Issue No. 33.

[513] Kobler, "Mr. Singer's Money Machine."

loss of her father, she wrote sixty years later that there still was not a day that she did not wonder how she would face the world without her father.[514] To the children of Mary McGonigal, Ruth, Clara, Florence Adelaide, Margaret Alexandria, and Charles Alexander, Singer bequeathed two parts each. To the one child he had with Mary Walters-Merritt, Alice, who had just been married at the Wigwam, he left two parts. Singer also left two parts each to selected children he had fathered with Mary Ann Sponsler-Foster, Isaac Augustus, John Albert, and Caroline Virginia. To the remaining children with Sponsler-Foster, Fanny Elizabeth, Joseph Emmet, Mary Olive, and Julia Ann he left only one part. To Violettie Theresa he left nothing. Singer explained that Violettie Theresa had married William Proctor whose position in the Singer Manufacturing Company had already gained her a great fortune. The two children from Singer's first legitimate wife, William and Lillian, were given only money and no stocks, William 500 dollars and Lillian 10,000 dollars. It is clear from the varying amounts awarded to the children that Singer had favorites and held grudges. In an act of kindness or to suppress a possible attempt to contest the will, the illegitimate heirs contributed 10,000 dollars each to the jilted William and Lillian.[515] One newspaper praises Singer, lauding that he did not shirk from his responsibility; he called each child by name and made provision for all of them.[516]

However, the same cannot be said for the mothers of those children. He left nothing to the five women who lived with him as his wives with the exception of the last

[514] Kahan, *Music Modern Muse,* 16.

[515] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance,* 199.

[516] "Singer and His Families," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat,* September 16, 1887.

one, Isabelle Singer. Singer left her four parts as well as all the property including the estate in England valued at 4,000,000 dollars.[517] Sponsler-Foster, believing that she was entitled to the widow's portion of the inheritance, brought the Singer name back into the headlines when she contested the will. Isabelle Singer and most of the children, wanting to avoid any more scandalous publicity as well as the expense of litigation, had made generous compromises to Sponsler-Foster; Isabelle Singer offering 200,000 dollars to settle outside of the courtroom.[518] However, Sponsler-Foster was not to be bought off; she wanted what, as Singer's wife, she thought she was due.[519] At fifty-nine years of age, the exceedingly well preserved and dignified Sponsler-Foster claimed that Singer was under "restraint and subject to undue influences at the time of its [the will's] execution" and she, not Isabelle Singer, was the real Mrs. Singer.[520] She built her case based on the fact that she had lived with Singer for approximately twenty-five years and had borne him ten children. Several people testified that for years she was known as Mrs. Singer. A company clerk from I.M. Singer & Co. attested that Sponsler drew 10.00 dollars a day for marketing expenses from the company and he knew her as Mr. Singer's wife.[521] Although her calling cards had identified her as Mrs. I.M. Singer, the surrogate in the White Plains, Westchester County Court was not persuaded to overturn the will. The repeal judge, furthermore upheld the original decision claiming, "A concubine cannot

[517] "A Millionaire's Wives."

[518] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 200.

[519] "A Contested Will," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, October 23, 1875.

[520] "A Millionaire's Wives."

[521] Ibid.

acquire the rights of a wife by survivorship."[522] The only thing that was achieved by Sponsler-Foster contesting the will was that Singer's escapades and intimate details of his life were once again paraded throughout the tabloids and discussed in salons.

Isabelle Singer remained Singer's legal widow and, therefore, inherited the bulk of the Singer fortune. She stayed at the Wigwam for the next few years raising the children, but in 1879, she moved to the more intellectually and socially active Paris. It was while living in Paris that the rumor circulated that Isabelle Singer, the attractive French widow, was the model for Frederic August Bartholdi's Statue of Liberty.[523] The statue that welcomes immigrants at the New York harbor was a gift from France to America in celebration of one hundred years of freedom.

Singer and his family discovered happiness and acceptance on the same continent that Adam Singer, Isaac Singer's father, had left a hundred years earlier. When Adam arrived in America, he found a land of opportunity. When Isaac left America, he was among the men who had made the most of those opportunities. Isaac left America as an incredibly wealthy self-made man who had earned his fortune. But his unchecked wealth and unbridled excess excluded him from New York City's Gilded Age society.

In America, Singer left a string of women who were engulfed in an era, which, according to Janette Thomas Greenwood, "the downtrodden fought back, demanding that the United States live up to its ideals of equality before the law, and justice for all."[524] Women were actively participating in wage earning in an economy that had become

---

[522] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance,* 205.

[523] Kahan, *Music Modern Muse,* 18.

[524] Janette Thomas Greenwood, *The Gilded Age: A History of Documents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 11.

increasingly industrialized.[525] Dubois and Dumenil agree with Greenwood; they claim it was a time that the downtrodden, which included the masses of women, were "determined to bring democracy to American class relations."[526] The most obvious example of how this democracy had evolved over the past half-decade is seen when comparing Singer's mother's divorce with that of Sponsler's divorce. As a result of leaving Singer's father, Benson was penniless, banished from home and family. In contrast, when Sponsler separated from Singer she was allotted a large settlement and a home. The Republican Mother of the Revolution who had little control of her destiny, had transformed into a Victorian Mother who was beginning to experience choices in both the private and public sphere.

[525] DuBois and Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes*, 356-357.

[526] Ibid., 357.

# Conclusion

It had been over a hundred years since the American Declaration of Independence had been signed and a new republic began to take root. A century had also passed from the time that Adam Singer, the immigrant father of the great innovator of the Singer sewing machine had landed in New York. In that century, America had seen its landscape and people reshaped and redefined. The evolution of the country was part of Isaac Singer's everyday life and part of who he was. As a child, his family had been among the brave who forged their way in the American frontier, he had heard the guns from the War of 1812, and he had felt the effects of the country's laws of divorce and coverture. As a young boy, he became a product of America's push to educate ~~their~~ [its]children. He had been awed by the Erie Canal and had participated in a new type of commerce. Singer, like other Americans, was awash with the Second Awakening and was confronted with social reforms. He lived in the small towns of America, Oswego, Palmyra, and Fredericksburg, and in growing cities like Rochester. In the big city of New York City, he experienced the filthy existence of the poor, and in time, lived and paraded with the wealthy. In Pittsburgh he saw industrial progress and in Boston he witnessed the emotional controversy over runaway slaves.

In his lifespan, Singer had cut the first paths through dense timber, traveled the roads in a one-horse wagon, and had raced on railroad tracks. He encountered many immigrants and sons of immigrants who were willing to take risks, willing to invent, and willing to gamble on their dreams. By trusting women to operate his machine, he

indirectly supported a movement that was willing to risk society's rebuff in order to bring equal and fair treatment for women. With his own three inventions, Singer was part of the Second Industrial Revolution that propelled America into technological supremacy. He was one of America's rags-to-riches icons but was still subject to America's social hierarchy. In Singer's lifetime, that hierarchy faced reconstruction as men without prominent lineages rose to great wealth and power. Before he died, he saw America torn apart by the Civil War, and although living on another continent, his company reaped the financial rewards as the country began to rebuild.

Singer was one of the men that made up nineteenth-century America; however, few Americans probably liked him. Historian, Ruth Brandon, remarks that Singer "was rough and violent in his manner and tended to intimidate all who came into contact with him, including his family."[527] Business partners Phelps, Zieber, and Ransom, found Singer rough as well as deceitful and nerve-wracking. Howe, William Singer, and Sponsler-Foster could testify that Singer was not only violent and intimidating but also very cruel. Sponsler-Foster claimed, "he had only lived with her as his wife to debauch and ruin her, and after he had worn her completely out, abandoned her without any means of support."[528]

Singer Company historian, Don Bissell, comments that Singer was a "complex man obsessively driven to extremes."[529] Singer was fanatical about the theater and willingly abandoned an apprenticeship, his work as a machinist, and both Catherine

[527] Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance*, 31.

[528] *In the Matter of the Probate of the Last Will and Testament of Isaac M. Singer.*

[529] Bissell, *The First Conglomerate*, 11.

Singer and Sponsler-Foster to pursue it. Howe and other manufacturers discovered that Singer was passionate, persistent, and very cleaver when they tried to encroach on the profits generated by his invention. Singer's neighbors from his homes on Fifth Avenue, his Yonkers's Castle, and his English Wigwam witnessed Singer's obsessive desire to display his wealth and to gain social acceptance.

Sylvia Kahan, in a biography of Winnetta Singer, observes that Singer "inhabited his own moral universe, one in which rules and conventions simply didn't exist."[530] Singer was unscrupulous in his dealings with Catherine Singer, Zieber, and Sponsler-Foster. His ability to maintain multiple intimate relationships simultaneously with McGonigal and Walter-Merritt, while married to Catherine Singer and pretending to be married to Sponsler-Foster, provides evidence that Singer's moral compass was pointed in a different direction than most in Victorian America. Even while seemingly happy and married at the Wigwam, rumors still circulated about his affairs with local Paighton women.[531]

The way that Singer treated the women in his personal life indicates that he did not generally hold women in high regard. He made it clear that he did not have noble aspirations for helping women when building the sewing machine; it was purely a financial quest. Although he employed women, he did so because they were pivotal in selling his product. He marketed his machine for the betterment of women but in reality, he had no interest in doing away with the only thing that kept women quiet.

---

[530] Kahan, *Music Modern Muse,* 6.

[531] Eastley, *The Singer Saga* , 29.

The negative side on the list of Singer's attributes is very long. But there is no denying that the man was a great inventor and had a large dose of charisma. He wanted his whole life to display that charisma in the theater but never had success. However, it was due to this unbridled charisma that the sewing machine was brought to the center stage, and an unwelcoming and unbelieving public learned to accept it. His brash and bombastic personality when channeled with the help of Clark propelled his machine to the forefront while his competitors lagged behind. He had created a practical working sewing machine that the world desperately needed, and he had the tenacity to promote it like no other. The company that bears Singer's name was instrumental in forming patent pooling, was an instigator in a widespread rent-to-own program, and was one of the first to successfully establish an international company. By 1870, the trademark red Singer "S" had become known worldwide as a lucrative industry that promoted productivity and aid to women.[532] By 1875, the Singer Manufacturing Company sold almost as many sewing machines as all other manufacturers combined.[533] For the next century, the image of the wholesome lady seated at the Singer machine dominated the sewing machine industry.[534]

Singer was vicious, obsessive, unscrupulous as well as the epitome of the American self-made man. He was in charge of his own destiny. He was born without money and family status, he sought his own education, he was determined, and was willing to take risks. In the end, he obtained tremendous success and wealth. He proved

[532] "Singer First," *Singer Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow.*

[533] Ibid.

[534] Ibid.

to be a gifted and charismatic innovator who brought a working sewing machine to the world. Half of the human race had been burdened with making clothes but because of the sewing machine, women were liberated from this time consuming task. Although women of the nineteenth century were liberated by the Singer sewing machine, they still in general had very little control of their destinies. They were at the mercy of chauvinistic laws, limited wage earning opportunities, and bound by debilitating social confinements.

One of the most iconic success stories of the nineteenth century was a womanizer who did not have a desire to improve women's lives. Yet because of his relentless drive to obtain wealth, he forever bettered the lives of women—he set women free from the drudgery of hand sewing. A Singer trading card (Figure 4) corresponded with the arrival of the Statue of Liberty, and possibly provides the best explanation of what Singer and his sewing machine had achieved:

> If the WOMEN of the world were to build a monument to commemorate that which had afforded them the greatest liberty, and given them the most time for enlightening their minds and those of their children, they would build one to the SEWING MACHINE, which has released the Mothers of the Race from countless hours of weary drudgery, and has in the truest and best sense been quietly but steadily *Enlightening the World.*[535]

[535] The trading card is copyrighted 1863 and refers to the Statue of Liberty as the Bartholdi Statue. Frederic Auguste Bartholdi was the creator of the liberty statue, which was erected in the New York harbor. The card gives the dimensions of this colossal statue, which was a "gift of the people of France to the People of America." .

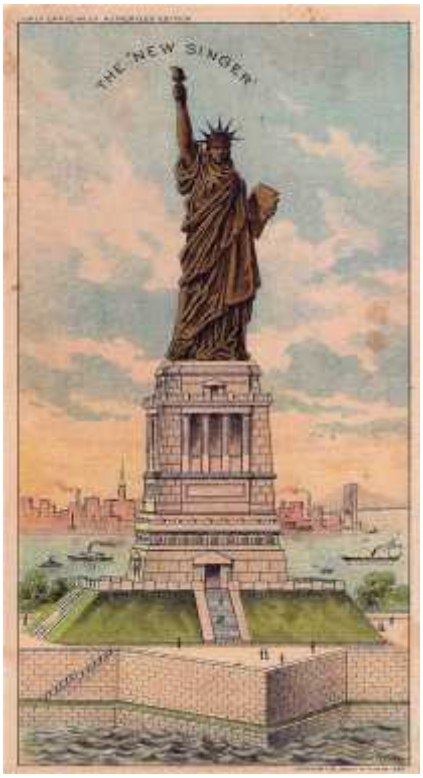


Figure 4. The Statue of Liberty Singer Trading Card

References


Alcott, William. *Young Man's Guide.* Boston: T.R. Marvin, 1838.

Anderson, George Baker. *Landmarks of Rensselaer County, New York*. Syracuse: D. Mason &Company Publishers, 1897.

Antique and Visual Sewing Machine Museum. http://www.sewmuse.co.uk/american%20sewing%20machine%20manufacturers.htm (accessed December 31, 20130).

Askaroff, Alex I. "A Brief History of a Giant." Sewalot, http://www.sewalot.com/singer_history.htm (accessed December 26, 2013).

Baker-Benfield, G.J. *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women and Sexuality in 19th. Century America*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Bank, Rosemarie K. *Theatre Culture in America, 1825-1860* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Best, David G. "A-Z American Sewing Machine Manufactures." Antique and Visual Sewing Machine Museum. http://www.sewmuse.co.uk/american%20sewing%20machine%20manufacturers.htm (accessed December 29, 2013).

Billies, Richard. "Brooks Brothers and Singer Sewing Machines." North against South. http://northagainstsouth.com/brooks-brothers-and-singer-sewing-machines/ (accessed December 31, 2013).

Bissell, Don. *The First Conglomerate: 145 Years of the Singer Sewing Machine Company.* Brunswick: Audenreed Press, 1999.

Blackbour, David. *The Long Nineteenth Century: A History of Germany, 1780-1918*. Oxford University Press, 1998. e-book

Bolton, James. "James Bolton's recollections of his forty years' experience with the Singer Manufacturing Company," 1901.

Brandon, Ruth. *Singer and the Sewing Machine A Capitalist Romance.* New York: Kodansha International, 1996.

Breakwell, Amy. "A Nation in Extremity: Sewing Machines and the American Civil War." *Textile History and the Military* 41 (May 2010): 98-107.

Brown, Thomas Allston. *A History of the New York Stage from the First Performance in 1732 to 1901, Volume 1.* New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1902.

Bunkers, Suzanna. *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women's Diaries.* Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996.

Burton, John. *Lectures on Female Education and Manners.* Elizabeth-Town: S. Kollock, 1799.

Carnegie, Andrew, *Autobiography of Andrew Carnegie* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1920), 93.

Cawson, Frank, ed. *Oldway Mansion and The Singer Family*. Torbay, England: Torbay Civic Society, 1988.

Churchill, John C. *History of Granby, New York From Landmarks of Oswego County*. Syracuse: Mason & Co, 1895. The book appears as an article at http://history.rays-place.com/ny/granby-ny.htm (accessed March 5, 2013).

Collins, Gail. *America's Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines.* New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 2003.

Cooper, Grace Rogers. *The Sewing Machine: Its Invention and Development.* Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1976.

Cott, Nancy, ed. *No Small Courage: A History of Women in the United States*. New York: Oxford Press, 2000.

Cremin, Lawrence A. *American Education: The National Experience 1783-1876.* New York: Harper and Row, 1980.

Cross, Whitney R. *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950.

Davis, Robert Bruce. *Peacefully Working to Conquer the World: Singer Sewing Machines in Foreign Markets, 1854-1920.* New York: Arno Press, 1976.

Dolan, Jay. *The Irish Americans: A History.* New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010.

Downey, Lynn. Levi Strauss & Co. Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2007.

Drury, Clifford Merrill, and Bonnie Sue Lewis. *The Mountains We Have Crossed: Diaries and Letters of Oregon Mission, 1838.* Lincoln: Lincoln University of Nebraska Press, 1999.

DuBois, Ellen Carol, and Lynn Dumenil. *Through Women's Eyes: An American History*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009.

Eastley, Charles. *The Singer Saga.* Braunton: Merlin Books, Ltd., 1983.

Educational Department of The Singer Company. *The Invention of the Sewing Machine.* New York: The Signer Company, 1970?

Eh Net Encyclopedia. "A History of the Standard of Living in the United States" Time Trends in Average Height, chart 3, Economic History Service http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/steckel.standard.living.us (accessed March 17, 2013).

Encyclopedia of Immigration, "German Immigration," http://immigration-online.org/109-german-immigration.html (accessed March 5, 2013).

Evans, Sara M. *Born for Liberty*. New York: Free Press, 1997.

EyeWitness to History. "A Portrait of America, 1830." EyeWitness to History, www.eyewitnesstohistory.com (accessed March 13, 2013).

Faust, Drew Gilpin. *Mothers of Invention.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

Finney, Charles G. *The Memoirs of Rev.Charles G. Finney.* New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1868.

Fogleman, Aaron Spencer. *Hopeful Journeys: German Immigration, Settlement, and Political Culture in Colonial America, 1717-1775*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.

French, J.H. *Historical & Statistical Gazetteer of New York State.* Syracuse: R. Pearsall Smith, 1860.

Frick, John W. *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America*. United Kingdom: Press Syndicated of the University of Cambridge, 2003.

*Genius Rewarded or the Story of the Sewing Machine.* New York: John J. Caulon, 1880.

Greenwood, Janette Thomas. *The Gilded Age: A History of Documents.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Gordon, Sarah A.*"Make it Yourself": Home Sewing, Gender, and Culture 1890-1930.* New York: Colombia University Press, 2009. ASLS Humanities E-Book.

Gourley, Catherine. *Good Girl Work: Factories, Sweatshops, and How Women Changed Their Roles in the American Workforce.* Connecticut: The Millbrook Press, 1999.

Halttunen, Karen. *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982.

Hazen, Theodore R. "A Mill-Wright Miscellany." Angelfire. http://www.angelfire.com/journal/millrestoration/millwright.html (accessed February 13, 2013).

Hood, Thomas. "The Song of the Shirt." The Victorian Web. http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/hood/shirt.html (accessed March 31, 2011).

Hounshell, David. *From the American System to Mass Production, 1800-1932: The Development of Mass Production, 1800-1932.* Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984.

Howe, Daniel Walker. *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Jabour, Anya. *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

Johnson, Crisfield. *History of Oswego County.* Philadelphia: L.H. Evert &Co., 1877.

Johnson, Paul E. *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837.* Hill and Wang, 2004.

_____. *Sam Patch, The Famous Jumper*. Hill and Wang, 2004.

Kaestle, Carl. *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society 1780-1860*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1983.

Kahan, Sylvia. *Music Modern Muse: A Life of Winnaretta Singer Princesse de Polignac.* University of Rochester Press, 2003.

Kerber, Linda K. *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980.

Kessler-Harris, Alice. *Out to Work: History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Kimmel, Michael. *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. New York: The Free Press, 1996.

Knapp, Mary L. *An Old Merchant's House: Life at Home in New York City 1835-1865.* New York: Girandole Books, 2012.

Kobler, John."Mr. Singer's Money Machine." *Saturday Evening Post,* July 14, 1951.

Kogan, Kira. *The Self-Made Man: Myth and Reality of an American Phenomenon.* Germany: GRIN Verlag, 2013.

Larkin, Jack. *The Reshaping of Everyday Life 1790-1840.* New York: Harper Perennial, 1988.

Laud, Leslie E. **"**Moral Education in America: 1600s-1800s,"*Journal of Education* 179, Issue 2 (1997), 1-10.

Leisch, Juanita. *Who Wore What?* Gettysburg: Thomas Publications, 1995.

Lewis, Robert M., ed. *From Traveling Show to Vaudeville: Theatrical Spectacle in America, 1830-1910*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003.

Lewton, Frederick Lewis. *The Servant in the House: A Brief History of the Sewing Machine.* Washington, D.C.: Government Publishing Office, 1930.

Lloyd, James T. *Lloyd's Steamboat Directory, and Disasters on the Western Waters.* Philadelphia: Jesper Harding, 1856.

Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Lubar, Steven. *Engines of Change: An Exhibition on the American Industrial Revolution at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution*. Washington: Smithsonian Institutions, 1986.

Lyon, Peter. "Isaac Singer and his Wonderful Sewing Machine." *America Heritage*, June 1958.

Malcomson, Robert. "War on Lake Ontario: A Costly Victory at Oswego**,** 1814." *Beaver* April/May 1995.

McIlwraith, Thomas F. and Edward K. Muller, eds. *North America: The Historical Geography of A Changing Continent.* Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001.

McKelvey, Blake. “The Theater in Rochester during Its First Nine Decades.” *Rochester History* 16, no.3 (July 1954): 1-28.

_____. “Economic States in the Growth of Rochester,” *Rochester History* 3, no. 4 (1941): 1-24.

Morris, Charles R. *The Dawn of Innovation: The First American Industrial Revolution.* New York: Public Affairs, 2012.

Naparsteck, Ruth Rosenberg. “Circus in Rochester.” *Rochester History* 49, no.3 (July 1987): 1-24. http://www.libraryweb.org/~rochhist/v49_1987/v49i3.pdf (accessed March 2, 2013).

New York Common Council. *Report of the Special Committee Appointed by the Common Council for the City of New York: Relative to the Catastrophe in Hague Street on Monday February 4, 1850.* New York: McSpedon and Baker, 1850.

O'Connor, John W. “A History of the First Fresh Water Port in the United States” read before the Oswego County Historical Society, Oswego, NY, February 24, 1942. http://oswegohistorian.org/2010/09/the-fur-trading-era-port-of-oswego-ny/ (accessed March 5, 2013).

Ozment, Steven. *A Mighty Fortress: A New History of the German People*. New York: Harper- Collins Publishers, 2004.

Portrait of America, 1830," EyeWitness to History, (2008). www.eyewitnesstohistory.com (accessed March 13, 2013).

Przecha, Donna. “The Importance of Given Names.” Genealogy.com. 2011 http://www.genealogy.com/35_donna.html (accessed December 29, 2013).

Puleo, Stephen. *A City So Grand: The Rise of an American Metropolis, Boston 1850-1900.* Boston: Beacon Press, 2010.

Richards, Jeffery E. *Drama, Theatre, and Identity in the American New Republic.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Robertson, J.C., ed. *The Mechanics' Magazine, Museum, Register, Journal, and Gazette*. London: Robertson and Co., 1850.

Rogleman, Aaron Spencer. *Hopeful Journeys: German Immigration, Settlement, and Political Culture in Colonial America, 1771-1775.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.

Rorabaugh, W.J. *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

Rosenberg, Carroll Smith. *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Rosenwaike, Ira. *Population History of New York City.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press,1972.

Rosenzweig, Roy, and Elizabeth Blackmar. *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park.* Ithaca:Cornell University, 1992.

Ruggles, Steven, and Matthew Sobek. *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version1.0*. Minneapolis:University of Minnesota, 1995.
http://www.buckbd.com/genea/1850fnfl.txt (accessed December 23, 2013).

Ryan, Mary P. *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865 Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Modern History.* New York*:* Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Sante, Luc. *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Life Old New York.* New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005.

*Scientific American.* "The Sewing Machine," July 25, 1896.

Shreeve, Daniel F. *Reactive Attachment Disorder: A Case Based Approach*. Springer, New York: Springer Science and Business Media, LLC, 2012.

*The Singer Company Elizabeth "The Great Factory,"* 1976.

"Singer Factories—Kilbowie, Clydebank, Scotland." Singersewinginfo.co.uk. 2013. http://www.singersewinginfo.co.uk/kilbowie/ (accessed December 29, 2013).

*Singer Yesterday, Today & Tomorrow*. 1988.

Smith, Neal Smith, and Anna Piszczan-Czaja Smith. *Encyclopedia of German-American Genealogical Research.* Baltimore:Clifford Neal Smith, 1976.

Spann, Edward K. *The New Metropolis: New York City, 1840-1857*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1981.

*The Story of the Sewing Machine 1897.* New York: Frank V. Strauss, 1897.

Surrogate's Court Westchester County. *In the Matter of the Probate of the Last Will and Testament of Isaac M. Singer* December 28-29, 1875, New York.

Tolzmann, Don Heinrich, ed. *German Immigration to America: The First Wave*. Maryland:Heritage Books, Inc., 1993.

Tortora, Phyllis, and Keith Eubank. *Survey of Historic Costume.* New York: Fairchild Publications, 1994.

Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. *The Age of Homespun.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 2001.

United States Bureau of the Census. "Table 8: Population of the 100 Largest Places in 1850." June 15, 1989 http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/tab08.txt (accessed March 31, 2013).

United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, *100 Years of Marriage and Divorce Statistics United States, 1867-1967*, DHEW Publication Number (HRA) 74-1902, data from the national vital Statistic System, Series 21, Number 24.

United States Trademark and Patent Office. http://pdfpiw.uspto.gov/.piw?docid=00001151&SectionNum=1&IDKey=4DCDF1441E32&HomeUrl=http://patft.uspto.gov/netahtml/PTO/patimg.htm (accessed December 26, 2013).

University of Virginia Library, Historical Census, County Level results for Rensselaer County, New York. http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/county.php.

The Victorian Web. http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/hood/shirt.html

Wayne County Historical Society & Museum, Wayne County Scrapbook, compliments of McIntire Davis & Greene Funeral Home, 216 E. Larwill Street, Wooster, Ohio, http://waynehistoricalohio.org/research/wayne-county-people-places-things/isaac-singer/ (accessed December 27, 2013).

Whitehead, John Frederick, Joann Carl Buttner, Susan E. Klepp, Farley Grubb, and Anne Pfaelzer De Ortiz. *Souls for Sale: Two German Redemptioners Come to Revolutionary America, the Life Stories of John Frederick Whitehead and Johann Carl Buttner Max Kade German-American Research institute Series.* Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006.

Winship, Michael. *American Literary Publishing in the Mid-nineteenth Century: The Business of Ticknor and Fields.* Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1995.

Woloch, Nancy. *Women and the American Experience.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1984.

The Woman's Society of the Western Presbyterian Church Papers. Palmyra Wayne County, New York. Rochester*: The Herald Press*, 1907. University of California Berkeley, http://www.archive.org/stream/palmyrawaynecoun00palmrich/palmyrawaynecoun00palmrich_djvu.txt (accessed March 17, 2013).

Woo, Ilyon. *The Great Divorce: A Nineteenth-Century Mother's Extraordinary Fight Against Her Husband, the Shakers, and Her Time.* New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2010.