

I am not very skilled with “fancywork.” That is a term that one seldom hears these days, but when I was a girl, I remember ladies much older than my mother regularly using that word. They were referring to knitting, crocheting, embroidery, and other needlework done by hand, both for utility and for decoration. It is much less common today, but for generations past, in a gathering of women, whether in a “sewing circle” or some other get together, most of the ladies had their small bags with projects underway along with them.

As far as I know, my paternal grandmother did none of these things. It is possible that she knit socks and mittens when her children were young, but I never heard anyone speak of this, and there were no long-forgotten items that showed up in later times.

My grandmother on my mother’s side, though, was skilled with the needle. Perhaps, as the mother of eight boys and only one girl, she felt the need for a little more femininity in her life. I think she knit mostly utilitarian goods, mittens and one afghan I particularly remember, but her crocheting was beautiful.

When my sister and I were small, Grandma crocheted for us two small cups and saucers, each decorated with a tiny crocheted flower, and then stiffened them with sugar starch. The cups were attached to their lacy saucers with thread, so they could not be separated. My sister’s was yellow with blue trim, and mine was a bright pink.

My sister has hers yet. Mine is long gone. Like so many of the handmade dolls and toys I recall, only the memory remains. I guess it was okay, too, because I played and played with what I had, and perhaps, that was the purpose. But, the little pink crocheted cup and saucer were not designed to withstand the rigors of outdoor activity, probably including the element of mud. But, in addition to the recollection of my cup and saucer, I occasionally have a look at my sister’s, still in beautiful condition. She was a more responsible child.

I do have a doily that my grandmother crocheted, however. And, our mother saved crocheted edging for a pair of pillowcases for each of us. She did not give that to me until I was past the age of playing outside with every little thing I had.

Our aunts on our father’s side, though, were the ones who taught us to knit. They were both skilled with knitting needles, and we came to enjoy that skill, as well. Both of us still have some sort of knitting project going most of the time.

In my case, though, the ideas I have often exceed my ability to execute. I can see a picture in my mind of a perfect finished project, but I am often disappointed in what my hands can accomplish. Still, most of our mittens, socks, sweaters, and caps—the utilitarian goods that keep us warm in winter—do come from my needles.

What I do particularly enjoy, though, is a handwork project that starts “from scratch.” When we shear our sheep, we keep fleece that I think I might like for a garment, rug, or some other item. I wash the

wool, card it, spin or felt it, and make what has been my goal since I noticed the nice wool when we were shearing. I remember one little gray ewe we had a number of years ago. I had kept her wool and eventually had made socks from the yarn. Every time I checked sheep on a cold night, I spotted the little ewe, wriggled my warm toes, and thanked her.

There are beautiful handmade lace, doilies, intricately knitted patterned shawls, delicate embroidery, and fine textiles of all kinds that I see in pattern books and in museums and galleries as well, articles I would have no use for in the life we lead and in the household that fits our lives. But, the workmanship is still worth my admiration.

And, I also still feel a sense of accomplishment when I knit a scarf or a pair of mittens that we will wear, or when I weave dish towels I will use for years, or curtains to block the morning sun in summer. And, having some kind of work in my hands during winter evenings—when I have already spent some hours reading—is both calming and inspiring. I end the day with a sense of accomplishment.

But, I still regret having taken that little crocheted cup and saucer outside to play in the dirt.

