

Mom kept her daughters dressed in love

By Elaine Williams of the Tribune The Lewiston Tribune | [0 comments](#)

Had my mom's clientele been different, she might have been known as something glamorous like a clothing designer or a stylist.

As it was, she sewed almost exclusively for her two daughters. I so under-appreciated her talent that I wouldn't have described her with a word like seamstress.

In my childhood, she was the person I could turn to after a bad day, a devout Christian Scientist, a cook, a chauffeur and even a journalist, a job she left to marry and raise three children.

My perception changed this holiday season as my sister, brother and I sat on the couch in my parents' basement in Omaha, Neb., looking at family photographs, the most complete record of my mom's body of work.

As we wracked our brains for names of friends who attended more than one of our childhood parties, details of the home-sewn dresses we wore came tumbling back.

My favorite was the pioneer dress for Halloween, probably when I was in third grade and devouring the "Little House on the Prairie" series.

It had a snug-fitting bodice, full-length skirt and long sleeves that puffed at the top. The pink ribbon straps of the bonnet matched pink flowers in stripes on the black fabric. A white apron had straps with eyelet lace.

My sister adored a short-sleeved, cotton evergreen dress with a white daisy pattern. "(I) Loved the color," she told me. "It was comfortable. Doesn't the print just make you want to smile?"

Amid the masterpieces were fashion don'ts, most notably a pair of red, white and blue paisley, corduroy pants. It didn't help I believed they matched a maroon sweatshirt with a green emblem of Washington University in St. Louis, the college my brother was attending.

It made me feel vain to have cared so much about something as superficial as clothing until I thought about it a little more.

I remembered an Oprah segment where she talked about giving presents to impoverished children in Africa. Oprah believed the hit would be dolls in the same skin tone as the children, but what they really liked was the clothing.

The harsh, unjust reality is that people often make snap judgments about others based on appearances. Of course people should be judged by their actions and moral character, not their exterior or income, but that wasn't always the case in my Midwest neighborhood in the 1970s.

Our family had a lot, but we watched expenses carefully so my mom could stay at home and we could afford college for all three children. The sewing was one of many strategies we used to extend our resources.

The feat required sacrifice. The garments in the pictures were the result of painstaking hours behind a black Singer sewing machine. She set it up in our living room by a window to get the most of the natural light she needed to compensate for her poor eyesight, corrected with lenses as thick as coke bottles.

She shopped fabric sales, traded patterns with a neighbor and altered skirt designs in ways that made my hips look slimmer.

What she did was something everyone took for granted in that era when women were in an even earlier stage of struggling to balance family and work. Actresses directed elementary school plays. Interior decorators painted their kids' rooms.

Still the choice my mom made wasn't automatic. She could have watched soap operas or gossiped with the neighbor ladies. Instead she focused her energy on something that made us feel good about ourselves.

What's more, like any good artist, she knew when to quit. In junior high and high school, she helped my sister and I shop the sales racks at department stores where she found a lot of her clothes, which the photos revealed to be much more stylish than I recalled.

As far as I know all the outfits, even the pioneer dress, went to Goodwill and have long since been cut into rags or thrown away.

That doesn't make what she did any less important. The proof is the joy captured on our faces in pictures that time can't fade.

Williams may be contacted at ewilliam@lmtribune.com or (208) 848-2261.