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Charity Shop Vintage? No, Family Heirloom

By Joanne Seiff

Many of us have vintage sweaters in our closets; in fashion, things often come back into style. Of course, classic knitwear hardly ever goes out of style.

That's why my grandmother gave me her sweaters. Well, let's start at the beginning. First, my grandmother cleaned out her wardrobe. On a good day, I am the same size that my grandmother wore for many years. She handed me several custom made evening gowns. There's the bronze colored duponi silk sleeveless dress with a deep v-neck, adorned with copper beading. The dress comes with a matching jacket that closes with a large, perfectly arranged bow fastening over the bust. I also have a floor length black skirt with a beaded top to match. The funny thing is that the dress that fits me best is a lemon sherbet concoction, with an empire waist adorned by a white beaded bow. It is a perfect early 1960's delight. It's never come back into fashion, but I did wear it to a fancy dress party once.

The evening gowns were handmade and accompanied by photos of my grandparents at gala events. Of course, my grandmother looked stunning in her gown...but, back to the sweaters.

Once my grandmother realized we shared a size, it wasn't long



before she started talking about the sweaters--such very special sweaters that she never gave them away.

My mother is an active person, and as a little girl, she very nearly hung off the chandeliers with her energy level. It was hard to contain her in a small Brooklyn, New York apartment. As a result, my grandmother taught her to embroider, sew, and knit to keep her occupied -- after her multiple dance classes every week! At age 8, my mother wanted to make a sweater for her mother, my grandmother.

Children go through phases and my grandparents were hesitant about this one. Buying enough yarn for a woman's sweater was actually a large purchase for this young family. Would little Judy be willing to stick it out and finish what she started? My mother promised she would.

My grandfather walked my mother Judy down to the neighborhood knitting store. In those days, the knitting shops looked like an old fashioned storefront. Long shelves of yarn lined the walls. The clerk ladies used ladders to retrieve things from high shelves and customers asked for help at the substantial counter. That is, except for my mother, who needed lessons as well. After they'd picked out the right yarn and pattern, the ladies at the knitting store would help my mother knit her sweater. For each lesson, my grandfather sat Judy ON the counter.

The elderly ladies at the yarn shop were Eastern European immigrants with accents to match. They helped my mother develop a strong and sturdy Continental technique. Every week, they'd show my mother what to do next with that sweater, and give her "home-work" as her legs dangled over the edge of the counter. When the lesson was over, my grandfather would arrive to walk my mom home.



In 1952, my mother's creation was the height of fashion. Peter Pan collar, baby pink wool and three-quarter length sleeves were flattering choices for my grandmother. The sweater still smells like my grandmother and suits me as if it were made for me. It was my mother's first hand knitted sweater, and it is the kind of perfect confection that no one could ever give away.

My mother made many other sweaters over the years. Some were cast-offs that I inherited, such as my favorite, the mid-60's black clinging and ultra-mod cardigan with the big buttons. Others were knitted specifically with me in mind, but the

other gift from my grandmother is a lacy cream colored cardigan, knitted by my mother for my grandmother while she was in college.

Another mid-60's creation, this one still bears her "handmade by" label, complete with her maiden name.

Recently I helped arrange a photo shoot and we used my sweaters as the samples. (Those are the photos shown here) As one of the friends who agreed to model put on the pink sweater with the Peter Pan collar, I said, "Careful! That sweater's over fifty years old!" A sigh escaped from several people at once as my words filled the room. The sweater—and the lace cardigan knit later on-- were still perfect, artistic creations. We all imagined my mother as an eight year old, dangling her feet on that knitting store counter as the ladies taught her and talked her through first her sweater. Then, we saw her in her university dorm room on a snowy evening, counting those creamy lace stitches.

Vintage can sometimes mean "old and dingy" when it's cast-off and found at the back of a charity shop. It can mean "timeless and elegant" when it refers to a custom-stitched duponi silk dress, with beading. However, in this case, these sweaters are the heirlooms. My grandmother is in her nineties, but her eyes twinkle and her face lights up when we talk about (my mother) Judy's first sweater. My mother, a lifelong knitter, still beams with pride over that enormous undertaking as an eight year old. It's hard to imagine garments this magical, this carefully knit, *ever* going out of style.

[About the Author](#)

Joanne Seiff is a writer and knitwear designer. See more writing and Seiff's patterns at her website, www.joanneseiff.com. Her first book, *Fiber Gathering*, about U.S. fiber festivals, with over 20 designs, will be published in early 2009.

[Contact Joanne](#)

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