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Commend Me to a Knitting Wife

A look at mid-19th century knitting



My grandmother taught me to knit when I was a young girl. I still remember her patience as she taught me how to hold the needles, and maneuver the yarn, and how fascinated I was that we were actually “making fabric”. She also finished almost all of my projects, as I tended to get bored quickly, and abandon them.

I put that skill aside as I grew, only to pick it up again years later. This time, I had another interest to tie it into...the America Civil War. I had joined a living history group, which strove to reenact the home life of civilians in the Civil War; I found that knitting was a large part of the daily life then, and thought this would be a great activity to join in. As I began to study the patterns, threads, and needles, I also realized that I needed to have a greater understanding of those things in order to recreate something in an accurate manner...something that would truly reflect what the mid-century Victorians were knitting, and not something that would simply be an antique pattern, with a modern look. I have to say this was easier said than done, as there were confusing references to threads

no longer made, to needle sizes that simply said things like “use the usual size”, and patterns that told us to “finish in the usual manner”. As I began to search for anything to help me interpret those things, I ran into a number of diary entries that mentioned knitting as a very common avocation of women, children, and even men! In addition, although we immediately think of socks when we think of Civil War era knitting, there were many more items knitted as well.

“Knitting has been called the friend of the blind, and is certainly the friend of the aged, as it affords the most easy and graceful employment in which they can be engaged. Then it is a really useful art both for the rich and poor...knitting can be done at times when no other work could be taken up, and during the long winter evenings what a host of useful things can be thus made by the industrious fingers! Caps, cuff, comforters, shawls, spencers, stockings, tippets, gloves, mitten. And then what stores of ornamental articles does it afford! What beautiful purses, bags, and beadwork will knitting produce?—
Godey’s Magazine and Lady’s Book, Feb. 1847



Knitted undersleeves
Author’s collection

Some of the items mentioned in the above quote we’re familiar with, and others we do knit today, but simply call them by different names. A “comforter” is simply a scarf, and a “spencer” a type of closely fit sweater. Other diary entries mention knitting socks, stockings, helmet or visor (a modern balaclava, or ski mask), neckties, braces (suspenders), hoods, shawls, and even undershirts!

Shawls also appear in a number of images from the mid-19th century, and are mentioned frequently in patterns and diary entries.

“We soon became very apt at knitting and crocheting useful as well as ornamental woolen notions, such as capes, sacques, and men’s suspenders....For the bordering of capes, shawls, gloves, hoods, and sacques the wool yarn was dyed red, blue, black, and green. Here again a pleasant rivalry arose, as to who could form the most unique bordering for capes, shawls, and all such woolen knit or crocheted clothing. There were squares, diamonds, crosses, bars, and designs of flowers formed in knitting and in crocheting.”

A Blockaded Family; Life in Southern Alabama During the Civil War by Parthenia Antoinette Hague.



Private Collection

Patterns for shawls appear in period books and magazines, with directions for creating unique knitted fringe edges, or simple fringes. In addition, many stitches are given which simply say they are “useful for shawls or comforters”, so that experienced knitters may create their own designs. The majority of knitted shawls in the mid-19th century are triangular, rather than rectangular, and use thread sizes ranging from cobweb to modern sport or DK weight.

In pursuing the definitions of threads, I ran into a problem. Although I could find great period definitions, they did not seem to relate to modern names, such as sport or fingering weight. Based on a survey of over a hundred patterns, from 1845-1865, I found the vast majority of yarns and needles used were smaller than we might choose today for similar items. In addition, in looking at originals in private collections and museums, I came to the conclusion that in the mid-19th century, knitters apparently wanted more stitch definition, and so seemed to create things from smaller threads and needles. Frequently

two identical pieces that had been knitted from lace weight threads were layered and stitched together in order to create warmth with lightness. However, it should be remembered that garments specifically meant for warmth, such as son tags, as well as some hoods and shawls, do use yarns on the 19th century heavier end of the scale. To this day, however, I have never seen an extant piece, with provenance that would date to the mid-19th century, which was knitted from a thread heavier than a modern DK (double knitting) weight. That is not to say that those heavier weights were not manufactured or used. 12 thread Fleecy, which may be compared to a modern worsted weight, is called for in patterns for various carriage robes and blankets. However, I have not seen a pattern that calls for that weight to be used in any type of garment or accessory.

The following list and definitions show the wool knitting threads that were used during the mid-nineteenth century. The names and definitions are all taken from books published between 1840 and 1880. Although silks and cottons were used, they were designated for certain types of items, and not as a general rule for any of the items we have mentioned here, and so we're going to restrict our look to the wools.

1. **Shetland:** a very fine wool, used for veils, scarves, shawls, etc. Is it not very much twisted. (*Godey's 1857*) It is not usually to be had in any great variety of shades but the scarlet and crimson are beautiful(*Pullan*)...as sold in the shops, this is a yarn much employed for the knitting of shawls...it is thicker than Pyrenean wool and softer than both it and the Andalusian, not being so tightly twisted. (*Caulfield*).
2. **Pyrenees:** This wool is of nearly the same thickness as Shetland, but more twisted. The dye of the colored Pyrenees is remarkably beautiful and fast, owing, it is said, to some peculiar property of the waters on the mountains, whence it derives its name. It is rarely met with genuine equal in this country(*Godey's 1857*)...is a finer, softer, and more beautiful wool than Shetland; and the dye is, at once, the fastest and most delicate of any. Visitors to Paris may get it at several of the Berlin houses there; but it is not generally introduced into England and America. (*Pullan*)
3. **Berlin wool [zephyr]:** only procurable in two thicknesses, four thread and eight thread, commonly called single and double Berlin. There are at least a thousand shades of this wool. (*Godey's 1857*). "Berlin" or "German" wool is adapted for working all kinds of Berlin patterns and from the manner in which it is skeined and notted [*sic*] in small quantities it is rendered the most convenient, and comparatively speaking, the least expensive description of wool for this purpose...German wool, unquestionably the finest description of sheep's wool which we possess, is the produce of the fleece of the merino breed. All kinds of wool are more or less characterized by a degree of harshness when compared to the Zephyr Merino...when very fine, it is called split Zephyr (*Lambert*)
4. **Andalusian:** a medium wool, less thick than Berlin wool, is used for cuffs and shawls. [Although mentioned in earlier periodicals, the earliest definition I can find is from 1882 *Enquire Within Upon Everything*]
5. **Fleecy:** a cheaper wool than Berlin, and now obtainable in a number of beautiful colours. It is made in two-thread, four, six, eight, ten, and twelve-thread, and is

- sold by the pound. (*Godeys 1857*) Fleecy wool is the sort of wool used for jackets and other large articles(*Enquire Within Upon Everything*) ...fleecy is manufactured from the Leicestershire breed, and is much used in knitting and netting. (*The Seamstress*)
6. **Worsted and Lamb's Wool:** used for knitting stockings, etc(*Godeys 1858*) ...extensively used for a great variety of useful purposes, which are familiar to everyone(*The Seamstress*) [note that "worsted" during this period does not refer to a size yarn, but to the way it is spun]
 7. **Patent Knitting wool:** This wool is sold in bales of various sizes, each exactly calculated to do some certain piece of work...as an antimacassar, a table cover, etc., it is dyed so, that by following the arrangements, the pattern, in varied colors, will appear. The balls are either of Worsted or Berlin wool. Directions are sold with each ball. The knitting is always moss-stitch. (*Godeys 1857*)
 8. **Crystal wools:** wools round which bright gold or silver paper, or foil is wound. These are sometimes called spangled wools. (*Godeys 1857*)
 9. **Pearl Wool:** this is a dye of modern invention. The wool is alternately white and colored, in one, two, or three colors, each not more than a quarter of an inch in length. It is a variety of Berlin made in four-thread or eight-thread. (*Godeys 1857*)
 10. **Chine wool:** wool shaded in various colors. (*Godeys 1857*)
 11. **Ombre wool, or shaded wool:** shaded in one coloring. (*Godeys 1857*) Shaded wools, which have every skein shaded from the darkest to the lightest, and then back again to the darkest. (*Pullan*)
 12. **Orne knitting ball:** similar to Patent knitting. The orne knitting ball consists of beautifully colored threads of fine wool, knotted at equal lengths; each knot terminating one row, and this, when knitted up, produces the engraved elegant design(*Grahams, 1858*) ...each ball does one design, and is adapted only for it. (*Pullan*)

Blended fibers, such as silk and wool, do not appear to have been commonly used during the period. I have seen one reference to that combination, and it was as a "novelty" item at the Great Exhibition in 1851 in England. In addition, other fibers such as alpaca, mohair, etc., were not used for knitting at this time in England or the United States. To be correct to the period, we really need to limit our knitting fibers to wool, cotton (where appropriate), and silk, when specifically called for.

As you can see from the list above, it is not easy to determine which yarns should be used for projects, since many of the names are different, and some of the knitting threads are not even in production any longer. And if you thought that the self-stripping yarn used for some socks is a new concept, just take a look at the Orne and Patent knitting wools...those created far larger items than socks!

I began to compare the wools recommended with various patterns, as well as looking at the consistency of usage, comparing them to extant examples, and finally began to work out acceptable modern substitutes. We can make good choices when it comes to

modern substitutes based on period definitions, as well as clues within patterns, needle size (when given) and the type of garment being created. Gauge is not mentioned during this time period, and does not show up in patterns until much later. The following list of substitutes is based on those findings:

1. **Shetland:** Any lace weight (two-thread) is appropriate, although 2-thread Shetland is still made, and may be found under that name.
2. **Pyrenees:** Lace weight, but with a slightly tighter twist than the Shetland. Depending on the garment, this may also include the cobweb weight yarns, since there are some extant knitted veils using this weight thread.
3. **Andalusian:** In between fingering and sport weight. A four-ply Shetland wool, also called “Jumper weight” by Jamieson and Smith.
4. **Zephyr:** a confusing term, since it can refer to texture as well as weight, but a fingering would be a safe bet for most patterns that call for this. It can, however, be a heavier weight wool as well, and the choice should be made depending on the pattern, needle size, etc., given.
5. **Single Berlin (4 thread):** Fingering or needlepoint. Both single and double Berlin were traditionally made from Merino wool, which may still be found in these weights.
6. **Double Berlin (8 thread):** heavy sport or DK weight
7. **Worsted/Lambs wool:** sport weight; the “worsted” here does not refer to weight, but to the production process
8. **Fleecy:** DK (double knitting weight). This is a wool that was produced in a range of sizes, from two-ply, which was probably close to fingering or lace, to 12 thread, which could be close to a modern worsted weight.

Just when we think we have a grasp of the threads, we have to look at needles and how the sizes are determined. Knitting needles are listed in various places as being predominantly made from bone, ivory, steel, boxwood, whalebone, and sometimes with a “knob of ivory” or “bead” to prevent the work from slipping off the end, or to convert a double pointed needle to a single point. Many times a pattern will only tell you to use “coarse wooden needles”, or “fine steel needles” or a needle “the usual size”, and so again, comparisons need to be made between variations of similar garments in order to determine needle size when no size is given.

And yet another problem we face is the knitting pin gauge. There was no consistency in the sizes, or types of the gauge, or even how to use it. One predominant one seems to be a Bell gauge, so named because of its shape, but there were variations in this, as well as confusion on whether to measure in the slit or the circle, and period sources mention both, or do not tell you which to use at all. In 1847, Miss Lambert created her own knitting gauge, or “filiere” and says that it is different from others, but she also uses the Bell Gauge in her patterns. The following is a chart I created using modern US sizing, modern UK sizing, a Lambert filiere, and two different Bell Gauges, measuring both in the slit and in the hole. As you can see, there are some

similarities, but also many differences. The key to deciding which needle to use, if not specified, again seems to be to study patterns and garments for clues.



“Archer” Bell gauge



1847 Bell Gauge



Lambert Gauge (Front – L; Back – R)

Modern US	Lambert Filiere	1847 Riego Bell		Archer Bell (pre-1870s)		Modern UK
		Slit	Hole	Slit	Hole	
0000 1.25 mm	25	17-18	21	18	NA	18
000 1.5 mm	24 (tight)	18 (loose)	19-20	16-17	NA	17
00 1.75 mm	22	15	18	15	NA	15
0 2 mm	19	13 (loose)	16	14 (loose)	NA	14
1 2.25mm	18	13	16	14 (loose)	14	13
2 2.25-2.75 mm	16	11-12	14	15 (tight)	15	12
3 3-3.25 mm	14	10-11	12	15	17	10
4 .3.5 mm	12	9-10	10-11	9-10	15	NA
5 3.75 mm	11	8-9	10	8-9	15	9
6 4 mm	10	9	9	9	15	8
7 4.25-4.5 mm	9-10	7-8	8	---	10	7
8 5 mm	7	5-6	7	---	10	6
9 5.25-5.5 mm	5-6	---	5-6	---	9	5
10 6 mm	5-6	---	5	---	4	4
10 ½ 6.5 mm	4	---	3	---	3	3

Diary entries mentioning knitting are numerous, and lead us to understand that it was a very common activity, practiced by women, children, and even boys and men.

“I am back at my books again, and read a great deal. I do nothing else, except of course knitting, which does not interfere with at all with my reading” Emma LeConte, Jan. 6, 1865

“I have taken up a new accomplishment lately, that of knitting stockings....Mother and I are knitting woolen socks for the soldiers....” Sarah Wadley, 1864

“I am also knitting a tippet on some wooden needles that Henry Carr made for me. Grandmother has raveled it out several times because I dropped stitches. It is rather tedious, but she says ‘if at first you don’t succeed, try, try again’ “, Caroline Richards, 1854

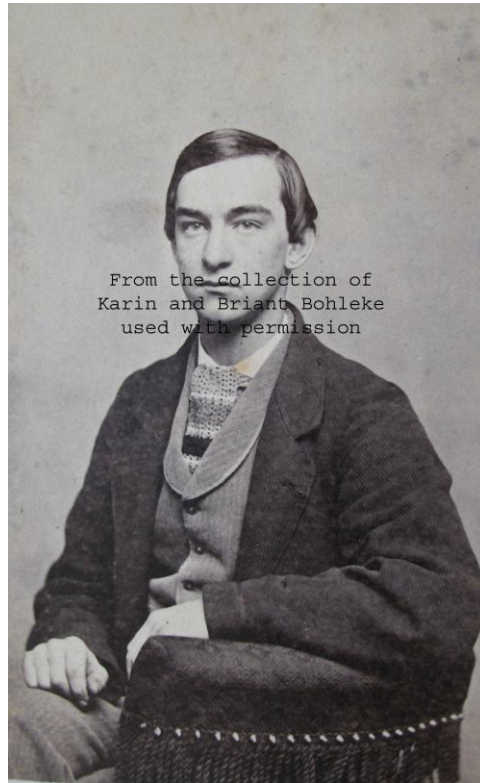
“...I finished my sontag and a mat...”, Anita Withers, Oct 1861



Woman wearing typical basketweave stitch Sontag

“It is a good plan to have children taught to knit, boys as well as girls, and to have them learn to knit without looking at their work. Old ladies who have lost their sight often knit very beautifully, and as a general rule we find that they began very young, and learned to knit without giving their work steady attention. The blind in all asylums are beautiful knitters, and in case of any accident to the eyesight it would be a great resource....” Florence Hartley, 1854

“...Jimmy is hard at work knitting a white yarn necktie. He made his own needles...”
Kate Stone, 1862



Knitted necktie

One of my favorite quotations is from a column published in *American Agriculturist* magazine, May 1846.

“..Though at present, Mr. Editor, a lonely and comfortless old bachelor, I will live in hopes one of these days of getting married; and if I do, I trust it will be to a woman who is a great knitter. Of all the many accomplishments which adorn the gentler sex, I do assure them, from the very bottom of my heart, that I esteem knitting among the greatest...”

... Commend me, then, to a knitting wife – a gentle being whom I hope it will yet be my happiness to possess!”

As for me, I think my grandmother would be proud to know that her teaching was not in vain...and that now I finish my own projects!

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Lady's Home Magazine

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addition to a number of Civil War era newspapers, it also has the digitized version of Godey's, which may be easily searched.

American Periodicals Series is a subscription database which is not available to individual subscribers, but may be found at major universities, or colleges which belong to a university system. It contains scanned and digitized periodicals which were published in the United States between 1740-1900, and is easily searchable. It was originally on microfilm, and a number of universities and colleges still have this.

<http://books.google.com/> Googlebooks is digitizing hundreds of books that are from the 19th century. Searches may be done here for full text books with the appropriate date range. Some of the period books mentioned in the bibliography may be found in full text here, along with many others.

<http://www.antiquepatternlibrary.org/> Antique pattern books, many from the 19th century

http://www.agsas.org/howto/patterns/knitting_sock.shtml Link to an excellent article from fellow AGSAS member, Karin Timour, on period sock knitting, with discussion of period fibers, etc.

yahoo group cwneedleworkers This group discusses all types of period needlework, but centers on knitting. The dedication is to creating reproductions as close as possible to originals, and not using modern shortcuts.

Supplies

There are numerous online suppliers of knitting threads and needles. The following is a good cross-sampling. Period-appropriate needles will include those made of bone and wood, as well as smaller double-pointed needles made from steel. Keep in mind that the "head" on any bone or wood single point needle needs to be as simple as possible in order to be period-appropriate.

<http://theknitter.com/>

<http://www.lacis.com/> Lacis carries excellent bone knitting needles.

<http://www.bugknits.com/> Bugknits carries smaller double pointed needles, ranging from US size 5/0 to 11/0 (UK 20-27)

<http://www.elann.com/> Discount and discontinued yarns; excellent buys

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Source for Gudebrod silk, size FF, which is comparable to period knitting “purse silk”