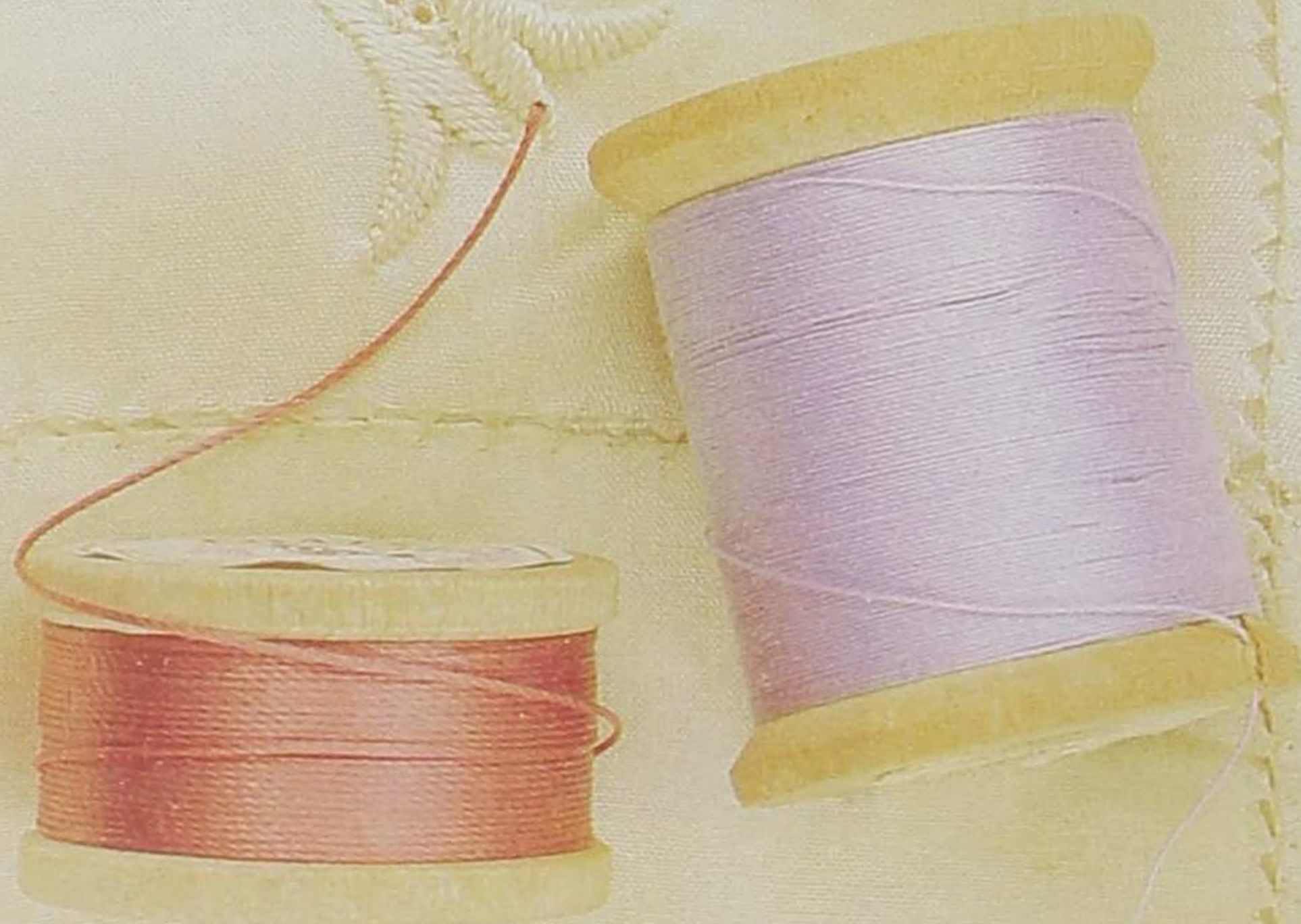


# Sunbonnets



by Mary Wear Briggs



**O**n a spring day in 1994, I had come to a small Shelby County cemetery by Portsmouth, Iowa, to visit my family's graves. Nearby, in Old Saint Mary's Church, the bells announcing the noon Angelus began to ring. How fitting for my grandparents who had left Ireland in the 1840s during the potato famine, clinging to their Catholic religion and their "ould sod" customs. My mother grew up familiar with the ways of old Ireland, and I had occasionally glimpsed that Irish heritage. Her parents had spoken Gaelic to each other, and Mom continued to use some of their expressions. "All ye spalpeens [hobgoblins] get to bed now," she would warn us. But my most vivid impressions of her paint a portrait of a strong Iowa farm woman who found beauty—and occasional danger—in everyday farm life.

Standing in the cemetery that day, I visualized my mother and her sisters as I knew them long ago, dressed in sensible shoes and cotton hose, their long aprons protecting calico dresses. Most clearly of all, I remembered their colorful sunbonnets.

**M**y mom, Nora Powers Wear, her sister Mollie, and most of my other aunts wore sunbonnets all their lives, believing that tanned skin was unladylike. Mom made her sunbonnets of flowered percale, with a fluffy, full crown, a starch-stiffened brim, and a ruffled edge that encircled her face. Each year she traded sunbonnet patterns with neighbors and relatives to find just the right fit and style—perhaps a brim with cardboard "bones" to keep it stiff, or an extended ruffle in the back to protect her neck during long hours in the garden. She never gardened without her bonnet; I can still see it bobbing along the rows as she sowed nasturtiums and zinnias, hoed beans or harvested beets.

On a farm in Harrison County, Grandma and Grandpa Powers had raised my mom and her five siblings to love music and learning. In their house, Irish lace curtains crisscrossed the windows, and books filled the tall secretary in the front room and shelves upstairs. In that atmosphere, my mother de-

veloped a belief in education for women and worked hard to obtain one for herself. At age 16, she rode eight miles sidesaddle to Shelby to take organ lessons, and she attended Woodbine Normal School to train as a teacher. Later, with her teaching money she bought her own piano.

Mom also attended St. Catherine's Academy in Omaha, where she learned dressmaking. She chose the latest designs from *Women's Home Companion* and other magazines. Her instructors taught her to use a set of cardboard patterns, adjusting them for the needed measurements and the various necklines and sleeves. Although the long dresses and ruffled blouses worn in that day were no small feat to make, she became a meticulous seamstress.

**M**arried in 1908, Mom soon set up her own household with Pop. Like Grandma, she hung Irish lace curtains in her windows and continued to wear sunbonnets and make dresses from cardboard dress patterns. In fact, I remember well the inflatable dressform that stood in our upstairs bedroom. One day when I was three or four, my siblings and I were playing in that room. I became intrigued with sticking pins in the model. When I realized it was deflating, I quietly sought refuge in the barn. Discovering my mischief, Mom soon rushed outside to search for me—and she didn't take time to put on her bonnet.

Hiding in the lower haymow, I peeked through a crack. As I watched her quick, determined steps toward the barn, Mother's small, 90-pound body appeared large and frightening. She soon spied me. Although she very seldom became angry and never punished us physically, on this occasion she picked up a small stick (later, she told me it was only a reed of straw). As I ran ahead of her across the barnyard to the house, I felt its sting, and I cried my heart out. Yet I don't believe my fear of the weapon was as great as the knowledge that I had disappointed my mother and ruined something she prized.

Mother also prized books. From the time we were little, she read aloud to us. When the *Saturday Evening Post* arrived in the mail, we often persuaded her to read to us right on the back steps, before the magazine was even brought into the house. But usually story time was in the evening. In the glow of the aladdin lamp, she would read tales by Jack London and Zane Grey or chapters from *Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates*, *Little Women*, *Girl of the Limberlost*, or *The Last of the Mohicans*. Even my father would

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**Nora Powers (front right), at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, four years before she married Frank Wear (who stands behind her). Mollie and Jack Powers accompanied them. Nora's needlework ranged from this monogrammed silk handkerchief, to everyday sunbonnets made of material like the print fabric.**

**Angels amid clouds adorn Old St. Mary's Church, in Portsmouth, Iowa, where the author and her family attended Christmas morning services.**

set aside his paper and listen.

Every Christmas each of us received several books from our parents and grandmother. But we could not unwrap these books, or play with our toys, or even enjoy one piece of candy from our plump stockings, until after church. In those days we fasted before taking Communion, and Mom kept a close eye on us as she tried to hurry us into our church clothes on Christmas morning.

Bundled into our Model T, we bounced along in the dark, in and out of the frozen ruts leading to Old Saint Mary's Church for 5:00 a.m. Mass. The sharp cold numbed our mittened fingers and frosted our faces. Gusts of wind blew through the cracks of the auto's snap-on side curtains.

After the icy trip, we appreciated the warmth and serenity of the church. Dozens of altar candles blinked and fluttered in the dark interior. The scent of pine boughs and incense tickled our noses. Painted on the ceiling above the altar, ethereal angels floated on fluffy clouds and blew on long, golden horns. Soon the quiet spell was broken by the heavy, echoing blare of the German brass ensemble playing "O Tannenbaum." The choir followed with the German words to "Silent Night."

We had plenty of opportunity to absorb the church atmosphere on those Christmas mornings. Even with Mom's frantic endeavors to get us dressed and into the Model T, we were frequently late to the 5:00 a.m. Mass. So after all the effort of getting us there, she often decided that we should stay for the other two Masses, at 6:00 and 7:00 a.m. This way, she reasoned, we were triply blessed on Christmas morning.

After church in the springtime, she would don her sunbonnet and walk with us down to Leland's Grove, to where the wildflowers grew in abundance on the banks and under the trees, so thick that we had to be careful not to walk on them. Dutchman's breeches, adder tongue, bloodroot, honeysuckle, jack-in-the-pulpit—Mom could identify them all. We gathered the roots of some, and she made her own wildflower bed in the windbreak behind our house. For



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

years I would watch for those early blooms as a sign of spring.

Mom loved roses, too, and she exchanged roots of old favorites with our relatives. An old yellow rose bush graced our front yard, and delicate English moss roses and highly perfumed pinks and reds edged the garden. Pop built a rose arbor in the front yard with several Dorothy Perkins climbing roses on each side. I realize now that this was his way of telling Mom that he loved her.

**A**lthough Mom found pleasure in flowers and books, she probably found little pleasure in doing housework in a home with few conveniences. When I tried to help her cook, the black Home Comfort cookstove behaved like a cantankerous volcano, spewing fire or going out at a whim. Too few corn-cobs, and the fire would die out; too many, and I would burn the bread. But Mom had mastered the stove, and it served her well. On dreaded ironing day, the stove heated the flatirons for her. Farther back, milk warmed in a crock, in the slow process of making cottage cheese. The teakettle sang, ready with hot water for vegetables, tea, or coffee. Bread rose, four loaves at a time, on the reservoir. Toast browned in the oven for soup. The warm area behind the stove became an incubator for newborn lambs, weak piglets, or baby chicks caught in the rain. On cold winter days, this quiet, warm space became my secret hiding place for reading.

The plumbing in our house was simple. A small silver pump next to the sink brought rainwater from

the cistern. We kept this water warm in the reservoir on the end of the cookstove, for washing our hair, bathing, shaving, and scrubbing dirty hands. Drinking and cooking water was carried in from the nearby well. We called our outhouse "the little house out back," and, of course, trekked out there even in zero temperatures, blizzards, or heavy rain. Every night right before bed, Mom walked us all out to the outhouse—and managed to give these treks educational value. She took a great interest in the night sky, so on clear nights we studied the stars. She could locate several constellations and always pointed out the paths of Jupiter, Mars, and Venus. Many times we witnessed the mysterious, flickering dance of aurora borealis.

Later, when I was older, my friends were amazed I had seen the northern lights so frequently. These friends also missed the meteor showers, as well as the hoot of the owls and the snap of their beaks as they swooped low over our heads, trying to scare us away from their fuzzy babies. They missed watching the bats and nighthawks zigzagging through the sky, snapping up mosquitoes. For a time I couldn't understand why my friends had not seen all these wonders, not realizing that they had probably grown up with indoor plumbing.

Pop was a sky-watcher, too. Like all farmers, my parents anxiously watched for storms and knew the signs for hail and high winds. Rosy or yellow sunsets, sun dogs or rings around the moon—all were signs of changing weather, and my parents knew how to read them. In the evening, when mackerel clouds streaked the sky from horizon to horizon, Mom would say: "Mackerel sky and a mare's tail, make big ships carry low sail."

On stormy nights, I was sometimes awakened by water dropping on my face. Quietly, the white-gowned figure of my mother would move around our bedroom sprinkling holy water. The water and her presence quieted any fears from thunderclaps and lightning flashes, and I drifted back to sleep.

**I**n 1916, shortly after my mother and father had bought our farm, my father built a washhouse. Most of our neighbors washed their clothes in sheds with dirt floors, and propelled the washers by hand. But our washhouse was far superior. It had a cement floor and rooms for coal and corncobs. Along one wall, Pop placed a cookstove for heating the wash water and for canning. The cream separator sat on

the west side. Pop's gasoline engine occupied a corner on the north. The engine pumped the well water when no wind blew to turn the windmill; it ground the grain for the flock of chicks Mom raised each year; and it powered the glory of the washhouse—a brand-new, double-tub Dexter washing machine. Pop had paid \$35 for it and beamed with pride when he brought it home for Mom. It reigned in the center of the washhouse and helped ease Mom's work load for years.

One summer day in the 1930s, I was helping Mom with the wash. After she ran the clothes through the wash and rinse waters, I lugged them to the long clotheslines in the backyard and hung them to dry. The Dexter washer, older by now, needed repairs. But it was the Great Depression, and Pop had little money for fixing it and none for replacing it.

As I returned from the lines, I thought I heard a weak cry. Nearing the washhouse, I heard my name called in a very light, high-pitched whisper. I hurried in. The wringer had caught Mom's sleeve, and then the front of her dress. It was torn to shreds, and her body, grotesquely twisted, was held tight to the wringer by her collar. The shutoff button had broken and she could not reach the levers. She was slowly choking to death.

In a strained whisper she told me to turn off the motor by touching a certain loose wire to a particular bolt. The motor stopped.

For weeks a raw, red strip showed around her neck. I'm sure the shutoff on the tub and motor were promptly fixed, but from then on, my brother Francis stayed in from the field on washdays. He carried the water, ran the tub, and helped Mom hang the clothes on the line.

The drought and depression of the 1930s sapped the vitality from Pop and Mom, just as it did from our land and livestock. To plant crops year after year, only to watch them shrivel and die, became heart-breaking. In the late 1930s Pop lost the farm, but with my brother Francis's help they accumulated enough money to buy an acreage. Mom finally knew an easier life, with running water, a furnace, and electricity. In the spring and summer my parents could usually be found behind their house tending their large garden, Mom still wearing a sunbonnet. ❖

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