



A Stitch in Time

When your ancestors leave you no heirloom—make one.

BY ELLEN NOTBOHM

SOME GUYS HAVE ALL THE LUCK. Some guys (and with apologies to Rod Stewart, girls, too) have ancestors who left them treasure troves of photographs, letters, books, diaries, and heirloom possessions. They can look into the eyes of their own history, turn the pages their ancestors turned, hold in their hands the same beloved objects.

Then there are those of us with ancestors who left us nothing but mystery. And just enough fact to pique fascination.

My great-grandmother Eva was such an ancestor. I would bristle if you called her a black sheep, but I think maybe her family did. She met with misfortune early in adulthood and appears to have separated herself, geographically and emotionally, from her immediate kin. No one remains who knew her. At least no one who will talk.

I admired Eva as I would anyone who had rebuilt her life against daunting odds. I wanted her in my life and wished dearly for some tangible object that would connect our kindred spirits. It seemed impossible.

Then one day, thanks to eBay, an astonishing thing popped up on my laptop screen.

It was *Fleisher's Knitting and Crocheting Manual* from 1912, with patterns for four shawls, all shown in white. A

vision leaped before me of lacy fabric flowing from Eva's needles as she made a bridal shawl for her 1912 winter wedding.

Eva had left me no heirloom, so I would make one.

It had to be authentic and it had to be "her," so I searched out yarn that would have been available in her time—wool, silk, and linen. From the bottom shelf of a mill end store, the perfect plain eggshell wool found me. Three separate elements of the Fleisher patterns came together as one. The lacy fabric flowed from my needles and the shawl that emerged was indeed "her." One of a kind.

This shawl is no one-occasion wonder; its versatility has amazed and delighted me. Eva is with me everywhere: at the theatre, school, work. Visiting friends, strolling the neighborhood, traveling the continent—and here, sitting in bed at 5:00 a.m. writing about creating an heirloom from an elusive ancestor who left me none.

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