

The threads that bind us

By Hannah Combs

Special to the Reader
 Courtesy of the Bonner County
 Historical Society and Museum

On a fine summer morning in 1918, seven women gathered at the home of Mrs. Norman Campbell in Sandpoint. Taking advantage of the sunny weather, they finished their tea, arranged their stiff-backed chairs in the garden, tied their white aprons around their waists, and settled in for a long morning of knitting socks. One of the younger women may have cheered “Knit for Sammie!” before settling onto the lawn next to Anna Sund’s collie dog with her knitting needles and basket of wool yarn. “Sammie,” a nod to Uncle Sam, referred to the thousands of American soldiers in France during WWI, who spent the winter of 1917-18 trudging through cold, wet trenches in Pershing boots. With iron soles, no insulation, and insufficient waterproofing on their boots, soldiers often wore two pairs of thick wool socks at once to survive the frigid weather. If they did not change their socks regularly, they could become incapacitated by “trench foot,” a fungal infection.

Receiving requests from the War Council, the American Red Cross put out an ambitious call for knitters across the country to produce one and a half million each of wool sweaters, mufflers, fingerless gloves, and pairs of socks. The Red Cross provided patterns and materials and coordinated delivery of knitted goods to the front, mobilizing thousands of American citizens to aid the war effort.

Knitting permeated through every facet of American life that year. Women knitted at home, at work, even at church. Those who didn’t know how to knit learned from their mothers, friends,

and neighbors. Children were directed to do more of the household chores so that their mothers could focus on knitting. They were reprimanded for getting holes in their clothes while playing outside, because no time could be wasted on mending when so many garments needed to be sent overseas. When the Junior Red Cross was created in 1917, the organization taught thousands of schoolchildren to knit, both girls and boys, using washcloths as an initial project. At a primary school in Seattle, one teacher recalled that washcloths would be delivered to her desk covered in grime, because the children would knit while chasing each other around the playground. The washcloths would have to be washed before sending to the Red Cross, but every effort was appreciated.

By mid-1918, when Anna Sund and her friends gathered to knit together, the nation had halted the production of everything except socks, which were in more critical need than ever. Knitters had to pivot and adapt to the changing needs from the front. Yarn retailers were required to turn over any yarn dyed in service colors to the war effort, so that knitting would not be halted. But even as the soldiers were desperately awaiting supplies, their service in Europe was giving hope to the folks back home. The end of the war was in sight. After knitting all morning, the Sandpoint women talked in the garden, poring over a map and pointing out the site of the Allies’ most recent victory.



A photo shows local Sandpoint women knitting socks for the war effort. Courtesy Bonner County History Museum.

When the war ended in November 1918, the influenza pandemic that had been spreading throughout the country that summer cast a shadow on the celebrations. Finally relieved from the horrific experiences of the war, the American people were facing another devastating crisis that would take the lives of hundreds of thousands.

Now we are experiencing another global pandemic, but if we look to the past, we know how well-equipped we are to face it. This community has risen before to support our nation’s needs, and we will do so again. In the 1950s Dr. Forrest Bird adapted his inventions in aeronautical breathing technology to help with the polio epidemic, and right now, the descendants of those inventions – ventilators – are being produced here in Bonner County to provide urgent resources for hospitals around the country.

Masks are the new socks, and people throughout the community are speedily stitching to stock up our hospital’s supply and provide protection for our vul-

nerable neighbors and friends. We too have to listen every day to the changing needs, as we receive new health guidelines and improved mask patterns. We have to be nimble, but we cannot forget that we are together, even when social distancing makes us feel alone. The garden party on Mrs. Campbell’s lawn is only a video chat, a sewing machine, and some comfy pajamas away.

If you don’t know how to sew, ask someone to teach you, or simply stay home and appreciate those you love. Thank you to everyone who is creating history right now by generously offering your skills to our collective effort, whatever they may be. Eventually, this will end, but our sense of community never will.

Research courtesy of the Bonner County History Museum and HistoryLink.org.



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