

## Preface

This is a new and expanded edition of *The Invention of the Sewing Machine*, first published in 1968 and reprinted in 1969. The response to that first effort on the subject brought forth many good questions about late 19th- and early 20th-century machines. We now wish to share additional data on these machines of the most colorful period of sewing-machine history.

The American-made sewing machine, like the horse and buggy, is past. A little more than one hundred years ago American inventors created and American manufacturers supplied this first widely advertised consumer product. Today, economic competition has forced the U.S.-manufactured sewing machine out of the market. The American companies that have survived have done so by relying on foreign manufacturing plants. Thus, an era has ended.

From the beginning the sewing machine had wide appeal. It had no instrument panel with push-button controls. It was not operated electronically or jet-propelled; but, to the masses of 19th-century people the sewing machine was as awe-inspiring as the space capsule to their 20th-century descendants. Appearing in elaborately encased displays at international expositions, the sewing machine was the mechanical wonder of the century to those who saw and used it. Expensive, yes, but considering the work it would do—a machine that could sew—and the time it could save, the cost was more than justified. The sewing machine pioneered installment buying and patent pooling. It also weathered the protests of the seamstresses and tailors who feared this new machine was a threat to their means of earning a living.

The practical sewing machine is not the result of one man's genius, but rather the culmination of a century of thought, work, trials, failures, and partial successes of a long list of inventors. History is too quick to credit one or two men for an important invention and to forget the work that preceded and prodded each man. It is no discredit to Elias Howe to state that he *did not invent the sewing machine*. Howe's work with the sewing machine was important, and he did patent certain improvements, but his work was but one step along the way. It is for the reader to decide whether it was the turning point. Of equal importance to the story of the invention is the history of the sewing-machine's manufacture.

The relatively few companies of the first decade, the 1850s, blossomed into well over one hundred after the expiration of the major patents and the dissolution of the Sewing-Machine Combination in 1877. A catalog list of more than one hundred and fifty of these 19th-century companies is included in this study. Still,