

## The "Sewing-Machine Combination"

WITH THE BASIC ELEMENTS of a successful sewing machine assembled, the various manufacturers should have been able to produce good machines unencumbered. The court order, however, which restrained several firms from selling Singer machines while the Howe suit was pending, started a landslide; soon Wheeler, Wilson and company, Grover and Baker company, and several others<sup>64</sup> purchased rights from Elias Howe. This gave Howe almost absolute control of the sewing-machine business as these companies agreed to his royalty terms of \$25 for every machine sold. In an attempt to improve his own machine, Howe was almost immediately caught up in another series of legal battles in which he was the defendant; the companies he had defeated were able to accuse him of infringing on patents that they owned. To compound the confusion, individual companies also were suing each other on various grounds.

Because of this situation Orlando B. Potter, president of the Grover and Baker company, advanced in 1856 the idea of a "Combination" of sewing-machine manufacturers. He pointed out how the various companies were harming themselves by continuing litigation and tried to convince Howe that all would benefit by an agreement of some kind. He proposed that Elias Howe; Wheeler, Wilson and company; I. M. Singer and company; and Grover and Baker

company pool their patents covering the essential features of the machine. The three companies had started production about the same time and approved of Potter's idea; Howe opposed it as he felt that he had the most to lose by joining the "Combination." He finally consented to take part in Potter's plan if the others would agree to certain stipulations. The first requirement was that at least twenty-four manufacturers were to be licensed. The second was that, in addition to sharing equally in the profits with the three companies, Howe would receive a royalty of \$5 for each machine sold in the United States and \$1 for each machine exported. It has been estimated that, as a result of this agreement, Howe received at least \$2,000,000 as his share of the license fees between 1856 and 1867 when his patent expired.<sup>65</sup>

The organization was called the Sewing-Machine Trust and/or the Sewing-Machine Combination. The important patents contributed to it were:

1. The grooved, eye-pointed needle used with a shuttle to form the lockstitch (E. Howe patent, held by E. Howe);
2. The four-motion feeding mechanism (A. B. Wilson patent, held by Wheeler and Wilson company);
3. The needle moving vertically above a horizontal work-plate (Bachelder patent), a continuous feeding device by belt or wheel (Bachelder patent), a

<sup>64</sup> These included the American Magnetic Sewing Machine Co.; A. Bartholf; Nichols and Bliss; J. A. Lerow; Woolridge, Keene, and Moore; and A. B. Howe. *New York Daily Tribune*, Sept. 3, 1853.

<sup>65</sup> "Who Invented the Sewing-Machine," unsigned article in *The Galaxy*, vol. 4, August 31, 1867, pp. 471-481.