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The Art of Homemaking



Rita Farro & Rhonda
Bettendorf Public Library
November 2019

As Rita Farro says, "It takes a lot of living to make a house a home. . . ." Rita adores the look, feel and the stories of vintage textiles. When mixed with a passion for auctions, estate sales and thrift store hunts, her acquisition of aprons, bed sheets, linens, cross-stitch samplers, created an abundant collection with a glimpse into home life of days past.

Rita curated *The Art of Homemaking* for the Bettendorf Iowa Public Library. Initially invited to exhibit during the month of December, the popularity prompted the extension through January 2020. Her collection, sprinkled with facts and history, garnered the interest of the Quad City Times newspaper as a two page spread, an interview on the set of Paula Sands LIVE . . . and that's just the beginning.

For the behind the scenes look at the creation of *The Art of Homemaking*, check out Rita's popular blog starting in mid-November: <http://ritassewfun.blogspot.com/search?updated-max=2019-11-25T02:00:00-08:00&max-results=7&start=16&by-date=false>. Rita's passion for textiles includes the love of family and friends. She often wonders if families use special heirlooms today creating tomorrow's family memories. Sew SCHMETZ & Grabbit® Too!

Rhonda

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Sewing
Star 

The Art of Homemaking

Rita Farro

Issue #73





The Art of Homemaking Exhibit by Rita Farro

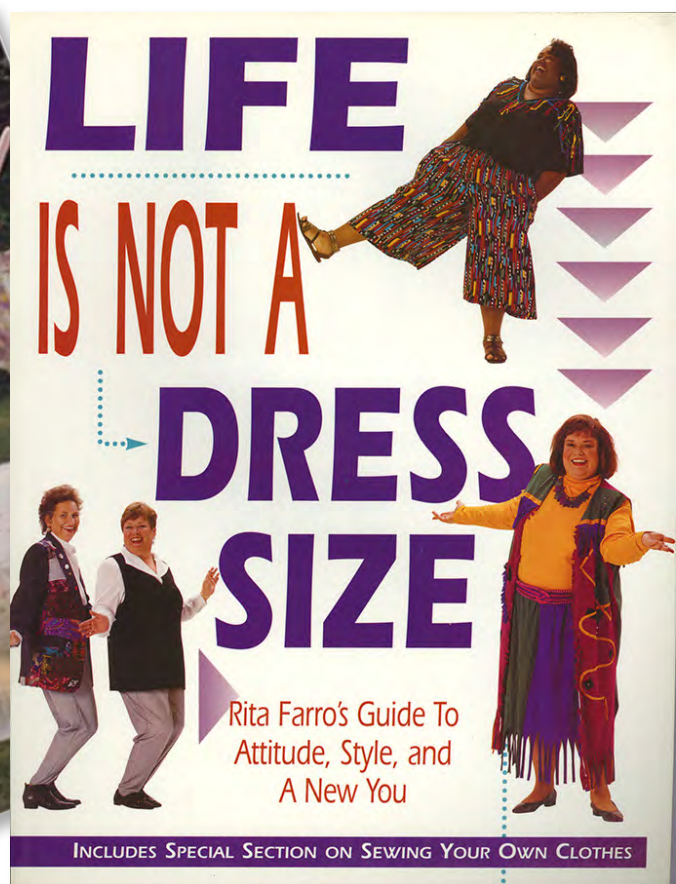
Every month, I get to write for this magazine. I love telling other people's stories. The whole point of **SCHMETZ Inspired To Sew** magazine is, of course, to revel in this hobby we love . . . to inspire YOU to sew!

In this issue, I'm going to share my own story, a remarkable exhibit, and a thoughtful look back at the homemakers who came before us.

Here's the press release I sent in November 2019:

Homemaking: A mostly North American term to describe the creation and management of a home, especially as a pleasant place in which to live.

In 2002, Rita Farro turned her love of vintage bed linens into a book, **Dress Your Dream Bed** (*Vintage Linen Inspirations for Today's Elegant Bed*). Rita is an avid collector of many things. Besides bed linens, she also loves (and collects) aprons, spooners, toast racks, embroidered linens, cook books, Singer Featherweight sewing machines, 7-Day-a-Week Dishtowels, napkin rings, quilts, cross-stitch samplers, and, well, you get the idea.



Krause Publications

What began as a love of vintage bed linens became an obsession with homemaking arts. Through the end of January 2020, Farro will curate an exhibit of her personal collections at the beautiful library in Bettendorf, Iowa. She is calling her exhibit *The Art of Homemaking*. Her intention is to fill both floors of this stunning library building. Every showcase and/or blank wall space will be celebrating *The Art of Homemaking*.

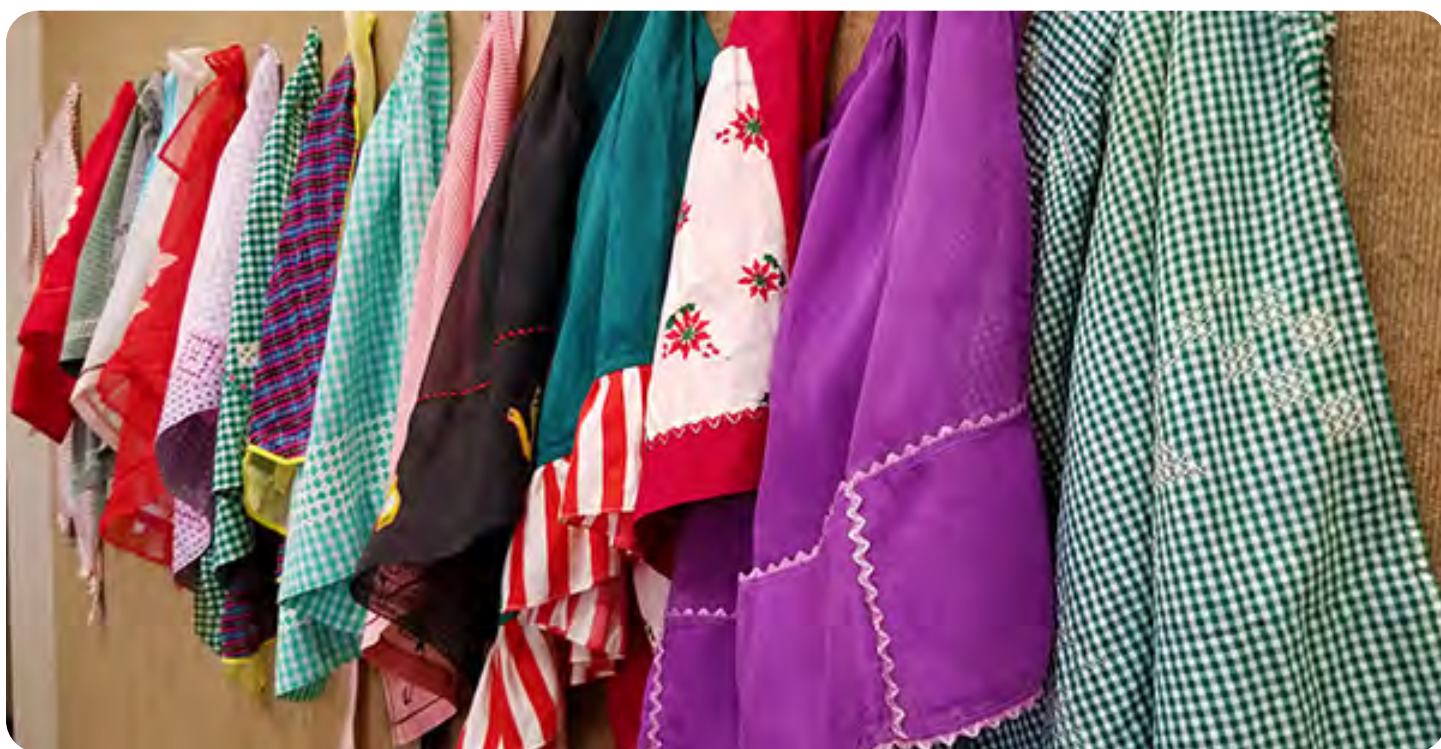
Farro says, "This exhibit is about what women have done, through generations, to make their home a welcoming haven for their family and friends. It's about the love they put into setting the table or making the family beds. The traditions they create by using Grandma's soup tureen on Christmas Eve or Aunt Rozella's silver for Sunday dinners. Every homemaker hopes their personal family traditions will create lasting memories for their loved ones."

Homemaking is an art, and every woman has her own way of doing things. This exhibit features some ordinary and extraordinary handiwork of mostly anonymous homemakers.

So, you might be asking yourself, "how on earth did Rita come to own all those tubs full of vintage linens?"

To answer that question, I have to take you back to 1996.

I had just written my first book, **Life Is Not A Dress Size**. After completing an exciting, whirlwind 12 city book tour, I came home to the bad news that my mother had cancer.



Apron Sampling

There are six children in my family, and we took turns staying with Mom. It is never easy to lose somebody you love. And it was a hard time on many levels.

Towards the end, Mom was in hospice care, with a hospital bed in the living room. She had reached the point where she was sleeping most of the time, and wasn't eating or talking. The hospice nurse told us that the hearing is always the last thing to go, so my sisters and brother would talk to her. Sometimes, two or three of us would sit at the side of her bed, sharing memories of our childhood. We fondly remembered our holiday celebrations and we laughed about the close calls, or accidents, we thought Mom didn't know about.

One day, after spending the morning with Mom, I decided to get away for a few hours. My favorite go-to activity is to kick around an antique mall or a thrift store. At a little hole-in-the wall place in Clinton, Iowa, I discovered a small basket of aprons. When I pulled out a red and white gingham apron, I was snapped back to my childhood.

My mom, Joyce Little, was a wonderful seamstress and, twice a year, she made her daughters matching dresses. At Easter and Christmas, the five little girls would walk down the aisle of Zion Lutheran Church in Princeton, Iowa, wearing identical dresses. The year I was 12, our Easter dresses were red and white gingham with chicken-scratch embroidery around the big full skirts. The same embroidery was also around the full sleeves.



Basket of Memories

I bought all the aprons in the basket (\$1 each) and the next day, sitting at the side of Mom's bed, I picked up the red and white apron, and started to talk about those dresses. Grandma Dodds (Mom's Mom), did the chicken scratch embroidery and only now, 40 years later, did I appreciate how much work went into those five look-alike dresses. At some point, I said, "Gee, Mom, it just dawned on me that after Wendy (the youngest) wore out her own dress, she had to wear Deena's, then Debbie's, Ronda's, and eventually mine. Holy Cow. She wore a red and white gingham dress for at least seven years."

Then this happened . . .

Mom opened her eyes, looked at me and said, clear as day, "Only yours was red, Rita. Ronda's was teal; Debbie's was pink; Deena's was green; and Wendy's was yellow."

And here's the thing, in that basket of aprons I bought? There were exactly five gingham aprons, all with chicken scratch embroidery. The colors? Red, teal, pink, green and yellow.

That was the very first time I realized childhood memories can be WRONG. I would have bet my life on the fact that those five dresses were all made out of red and white gingham fabric.

Anyway, that apron incident, more than 20 years ago, started me down a path of joyous collecting and deep appreciation for everyday household linens. I've always loved going to auctions, they are a VERY POPULAR activity here in Iowa. Looking for embroidered bed linens or 7-Days-a-Week dishtowel sets became my peculiar obsession. I would be



7-Days-a-Week Dishtowels

thrilled to score six sets of embroidered pillowcases for \$2.50/pair, and you simply would not believe the extraordinary bed linens I discovered along the way. I started to ask questions and do some research. I learned about quilt cuffs, wool batts, and flat pillow shams.

In 2002, I put that information together and wrote my second book, **Dress Your Dream Bed** (*Vintage Linen Inspirations for Today's Elegant Bed*). Writing the book gave me a good excuse to haunt auctions, estate sales, antique malls, and thrift stores for vintage linens. And I LOVED DOING IT. But, who are we kidding? NOBODY needs over 100 aprons, scores of pillowcase sets, or 50 vintage cotton sheets (all full size). But who could resist a beautiful set of redwork pillow shams? I mean, let's face it, the embroidery is exquisite, and, hey, I bought it for \$2.50. My problem is I just CANNOT PASS UP A BARGAIN!!

So, my collection went on long after my book was published, and it grew, and grew, and grew.

Until one day, I got a call from my cousin, Chris, who works at the Bettendorf Library. Part of her job is to fill the display cases. She casually asked me if I had anything I might like to display. Hmmmm

The next day, I called her back and told her I'd be delighted. And, as a matter of fact, I'd be taking over the entire library for at least a month, the walls, as well as the display cases. The exhibit would be called, *The Art of Homemaking*.



Redwork Embroidered Bed Linens

I started to sort through my tubs and bins, and was delighted to discover that I actually could put together some “categories:”

1. Aprons
2. 7-Days-a-Week Dishtowels
3. Vintage Bed Sheets
4. Pillowcases
5. Redwork Embroidered Bed Linens
6. Tablecloths, Napkins
7. Cross-Stitch Samplers
8. Singer Featherweight, with Attachments
9. Friendship Quilt Top, signed by 25 different women

The day I sent out the press release, Alma Gaul, from the *Quad City Times* (the editor of the Home & Garden section) called. She came to the library to see the exhibit on the first day, and she wrote a WONDERFUL story about it for the December 8, Sunday edition. Then, Paula Sands called and invited me to come on her live television show to talk about the exhibit. (She has a very popular local afternoon show called *PSL*).

YIKES. So, now I was committed!! Rhonda Pierce came to Iowa for Thanksgiving, and on December 1, she got in on the hard work of “installing” the *Art of Homemaking* exhibit. Along with my friends, Linda Phillips and Jeanne Little, the four of us hauled bushels of textile treasures into the library. We took over a conference room on the second floor, set up two



ironing stations, and sorted out the various “categories.” The hardest job was trying to HANG IT ALL. We sprinkled cross-stitch samplers throughout the exhibit.

The *Art of Homemaking* exhibit was stunning. The heart of the exhibit is the unfinished quilt top displayed on the wall in the fireplace area of the main floor. It’s a friendship quilt I bought for \$15 at a local antique mall. There are 25 signed “blocks”: Ruthie, Virginia, Hazel, Dottie, etc.

Who were these women? And what’s the story behind this quilt? I am hoping somebody recognizes one of the names, so I can return the quilt to the family of an original maker...

For me, the sad thing is that so many of these beautiful items were never used. As part of the library exhibit, I placed a gift box with a decorated flat sheet and two matching pillowcases, still wrapped in the original cellophane. We found this set in my mother’s “hope chest” after she died. She was saving it, waiting for a special occasion, that obviously never came.

I believe EVERY DAY you spend with people you love is a special occasion. USE YOUR BEST STUFF. Get it out of the drawers and hope chests. Make the bed, set the table, cut up the Damask tablecloths for pillowcases. Do whatever you want! But USE THOSE THINGS. You can’t create memories if you don’t use them.

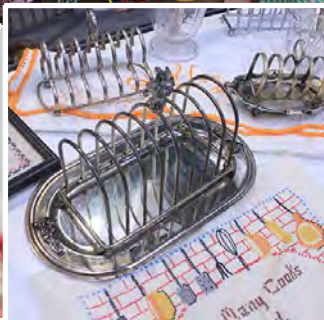
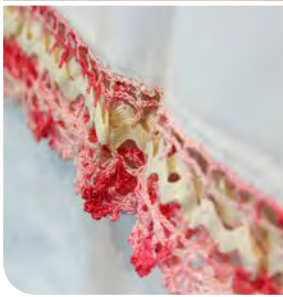
— written by Rita Farro



There have been many well-researched books written about vintage linens, chicken feed fabrics, etc. In my exhibit, I featured several examples. It was surprising to me that many people didn't know what I meant by "chicken feed" fabric.

Before the invention of cellophane or plastic, most things came packaged in muslin. Sugar, flour, rice, beans, chicken feed, all came in fabric sacks, usually stamped with the company logo. And, of course, the thrifty homemaker would bleach out the words and use the fabric to make household linens. Dishtowels, curtains, bed sheets, pillowcases, aprons, those utilitarian things became a special fascination for me. It's incredible how much time and energy they devoted to turning muslin fabric (meant to be discarded) into real works of art.

- Rita



"It takes a lot of living to make a house a home"

- Rita

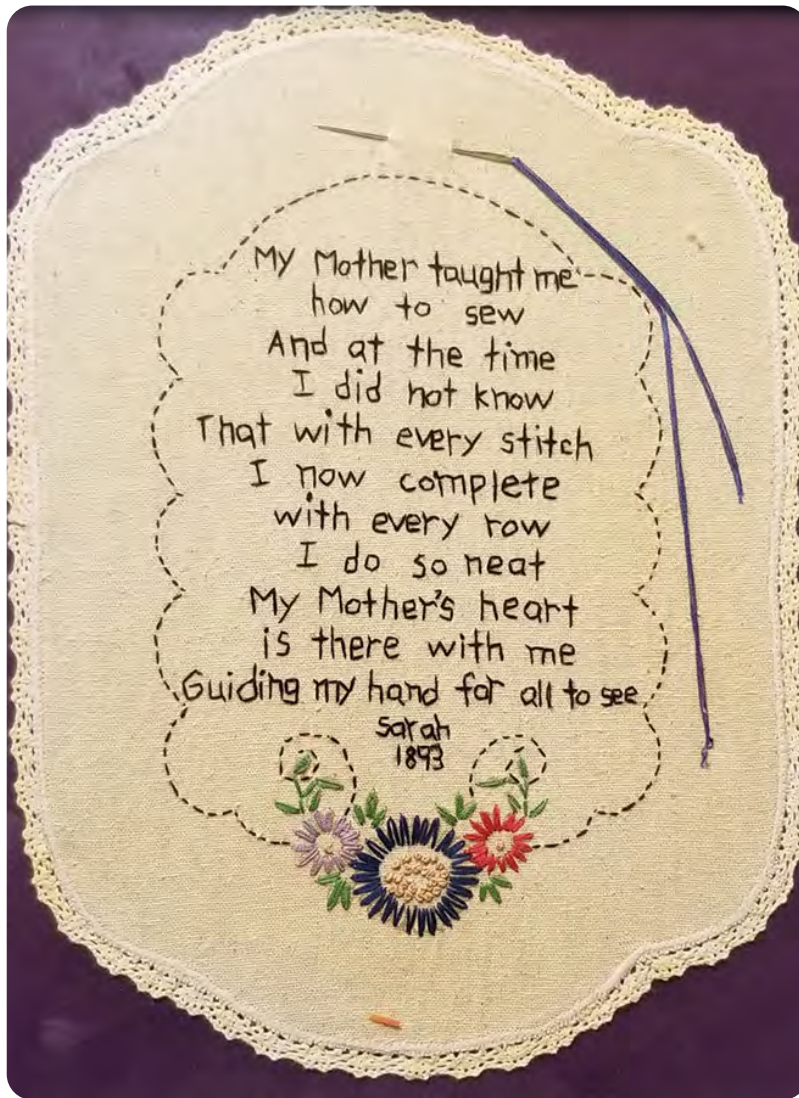


Rita Farro on Paula Sands Live
December 16, 2019
KWQC-TV6
Davenport, IA

<https://www.kwqc.com/content/misc/The-Art-of-Homemaking-566248101.html>



Pre-Exhibit Prep with Rita and Friends.



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Needle Points with Rhonda



Word Search How Many Can You Find?

C I N H A Z T Y R E D I O R B M E E C E
I Z T E M H C S G H C G B A B N Y T E E
R B R M E I L T D W N R L N M L Q D H T
B R I S A D C D P I D L O H E S U O H E
A N M T M H L R W R P S V A T M I D A P
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N Z N T O P S T I T C H L O L H T E T A
X E B C T H U N I V E R S A L X I R L H
D E A H W P T L E R H X T I I E N H O H
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BALLPOINT	HEMSTITCH	NEEDLE	SHARP
DENIM	HOUSEHOLD	QUILTING	STRETCH
EMBROIDERY	LEATHER	THREAD	TOPSTITCH
FABRIC	METALLIC	SCHMETZ	UNIVERSAL
	MICROTEX	SEWING	

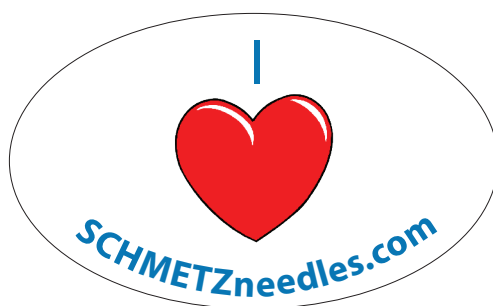
Answers can be found at <https://www.schmetzneedles.com/schmetz-kids/>.



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