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Stitch by Stitch: Elizabeth Zimmermann's Knitting Camp –
An Institution, An Experience, A Legacy

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Abstract:

In 1974, Elizabeth Zimmermann taught the first knitting camp/retreat offered in the United States. Zimmermann began her mail-order yarn supply business and knitting newsletters in the mid-1950s. As her popularity among knitters and women grew, Zimmermann went on to write more newsletters, publish knitting books and was eventually asked to teach the UW-Extension Shell Lake knitting camp. At the time, many American women and knitters were isolated and were able to form connections with other knitters through Zimmermann. Evidence gathered from Zimmermann's unpublished scrapbooks, published books and oral history interviews conducted by the author suggest that women found a connection and friend in Zimmermann through the camp and through her writing. Though knitting may not seem an empowering craft; many American women found hope and strength in Zimmermann and the knitting camp as an institution for personal growth and feminism.

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“Knit on, with confidence and hope, through all crises.”

- Elizabeth Zimmermann

I. Introduction

Most European settlers came to Central Wisconsin between the mid-19th and early-20th centuries when logging and agriculture were the primary means of economic prosperity. Scholars have traditionally devoted their attention to men as the settlers of Wisconsin, mentioning women as minor players in the background. However, Joan M. Jensen’s recent book, *Calling This Place Home: Women on the Wisconsin Frontier, 1850-1925*, examines the contributions women made in pioneering and settling Central Wisconsin. Jensen points out that women contributed to Wisconsin’s development through domestic and agricultural activities while their husbands were away logging or mining. Additionally, she stresses Wisconsin women’s innovative nature that helped them not only survive, but thrive.¹

As settlers moved in, families had to build temporary shelter and clear the land of rocks and other debris in order to begin their subsistence farming operations. While Jensen points out that both men and women contributed to these activities, women bore much of the responsibility of harvesting, processing food and fabrics, and producing meals and clothing so their families could survive.² Since many settler women shared similar experiences of providing for their families through gardening, cooking and sewing, bonds between women were strong and their friendships usually helped them overcome the pains of pioneer female life which included

¹ Joan M. Jensen, *Calling This Place Home: Women on the Wisconsin Frontier, 1850-1925* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2006) x-xiv. Jensen wrote this book because her female ancestors pioneered Central Wisconsin. Much of her research included travelling to these different parts of Wisconsin where she visited relatives and finally felt at home.

² Ibid, 100-101.

childbirth, providing for their own and their family's health and keeping their families together.³ Friendships between pioneer women helped their survival because they shared knowledge and resources in order to make one another's lives easier.

Wisconsin's next generation of women settlers included a remarkable woman named Elizabeth Zimmermann.⁴ Although she made her journey some twenty-five to seventy-five years after the women Jensen studied; Elizabeth Zimmermann followed the path of many Wisconsin immigrants – Europe to New England to Wisconsin. Although Zimmermann was not a pioneer in a geographical sense, she can be considered a pioneering Wisconsin woman who explored the intersection of art, craft, entrepreneurship, and feminism. Zimmermann and her husband immigrated to the United States in 1937 where they first lived in Long Island, New York and New Hope, Pennsylvania and began a family. Although her husband was the main bread-winner of the family, Zimmermann contributed to their household economy through her knitting, designing and as the owner of her mail-order yarn business. They later moved to Wisconsin, living in Milwaukee and later in Pittsville, a small Central Wisconsin town. Upon moving to the Pittsville area, Zimmermann began teaching an annual the knitting camp at UW Extension – Shell Lake.⁵ Just as earlier Wisconsin women built connections with one another through their domestic activities and shared experiences, so too did Zimmermann and her knitting camp facilitate close relationships among American women knitters.

While thorough scholarly historical work on early Wisconsin women exists, there has been little written on Wisconsin women in the post – World War II era. As Genevieve G. McBride discusses in her book *Women's Wisconsin: From Native Matriarchies to the New*

³ Ibid, 98-99.

⁴ See Appendix A for a picture of Zimmermann.

⁵ Elizabeth Zimmermann, *The Opinionated Knitter: Newsletters, 1958-1968* (Pittsville, Wisconsin: Schoolhouse Press, 2005), 5.

Millennium, there are many stories about Wisconsin women since 1950 that have not yet been researched, despite the abundant primary source material. As the title of this section, “Never Done,” suggests, not only have Wisconsin women never stopped making history but also historians’ work is “never done” in that there are always new subjects, people and events to research. McBride hopes to give historians and researchers more ideas as she explained possible areas for research dealing with Wisconsin women.⁶

Despite McBride’s recognition of the lack of scholarly literature on Wisconsin women since 1950, she focuses mainly on politics, Second Wave Feminism, education, and race. Nowhere in her final chapter did McBride mention domesticity and traditional women’s art and craft or friendship. Overlooking these areas, McBride excluded a large number of Wisconsin women in her analysis of future research ideas. This paper therefore has two goals: first, to do what McBride urged – write more about Wisconsin women and their contributions since 1950 and second, to bring knitting into the scholarly world and explore the social and cultural significance of mid to late twentieth century knitting for women in Wisconsin and beyond.

Writing the history of a knitter is somewhat difficult, as scholarly secondary sources on knitting are sorely lacking.⁷ Primary sources, however, are abundant. Sources consulted for this project include Elizabeth Zimmermann’s published works and unpublished scrapbooks filled with letters, pieces of articles and her own personal comments. I conducted two oral history

⁶ Genevieve G. McBride, *Women’s Wisconsin: From Native Matriarchies to the New Millennium* (Madison, Wisconsin: The Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2005) 427. McBride put together this anthology about Wisconsin women mainly using articles written for the *Wisconsin Magazine of History* where her main goal was to show the significance of Wisconsin women and what present day historians can write about regarding Wisconsin’s rich women’s history since 1950.

⁷ Both Susan Strawn’s and Anne MacDonald’s books are good general overviews of American knitting but neither were published by academic presses. Through my research I was able to find sources about war knitting and knitting in other instances but none that really delved into the issues presented in my paper. Richard Rutt’s *A History of Hand Knitting* is considered one of the most thorough books on hand knitting, however, Rutt did not focus on American knitting and although it is from a well-known knitting press, it is not an academic one. Despite his thorough analysis, Rutt’s book, similarly to Strawn’s and MacDonald’s, does not focus and delve into a specific issue in terms of hand knitting.

interviews with knitting camp attendees who met Zimmermann and were inspired by her, and one interview with Meg Swansen, Zimmermann's second daughter. Like her mother, Swansen opened her own yarn shop in the late 1960s in her family's living room. Since then, she has co-authored and authored knitting books and videos and currently lives in Pittsville, Wisconsin and continues to run Zimmermann's mail-order yarn and publishing business, Schoolhouse Press.⁸

My paper begins with a brief history of American knitting, in which I explain when and where knitting first appeared in the colonies and the different stages of American knitting. Zimmermann did not enter the American knitting scene until the 1950s, the years leading up to the 1950s set the context for Zimmermann's work. The second section of the paper provides Zimmermann's biographical information and introduces her knitting camp. The next section focuses on the experience of the campers and explores the significance of knitting and the camp for them. In this section, I consider the relationship between knitting and Second Wave Feminism and examine knitting's role as both a traditional women's craft and a medium of women's artistic expression. The final section, my conclusion, delves into Elizabeth Zimmermann's legacy by analyzing what she meant to her readers, and campers and how the business of knitting has changed and remained the same.

II. American Knitting: A Brief History

For millennia, people have used craft to produce material goods in order to live. From blacksmithing to weaving, each provided essential items for survival and cultural expression. Knitting is no different. Archeological evidence suggests the earliest knitted garments date back to the second century C.E. Hand knitting has been used by different cultures for centuries in the

⁸ Meg Swansen, interview with author, Pittsville, Wisconsin, September 18, 2009.

domestic and economic realms as a practical way to produce clothing either to wear or for profit. It is this ability to transcend geographical and cultural boundaries that makes knitting a specialized and widely understood craft.⁹ However, despite the long history of hand-knitting in other areas of the world, the history of knitting in America is one set apart from the others. The story of American knitting touches on politics, fashion, domesticity, and art.¹⁰

The story of American knitting began in the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay Colonies during the 1620s and 1630s. As Anne Macdonald points out in *No Idle Hands: The Social History of American Knitting*, the first women colonists, unable to bring spinning wheels aboard the ships from England, knitted with limited supplies of English yarn. However, once colonists built houses and had sufficient food sources, the local production of yarn soon followed. Knitting garments at home was less expensive and faster than importing them from England.¹¹ As knitting supplies became more abundant, children of all social classes, especially girls, acquired the skill. Knitting even brought women some economic autonomy, as their knitted garments were bartered for food and other daily necessities.¹² In the American Revolution knitting became an overtly political act, as some women joined the rebels' cause by spinning yarn and knitting items previously imported from Britain.¹³ Knitting also enabled patriot women to show support for the cause by providing warm, hand-made, American goods for the soldiers.¹⁴

⁹ Richard Rutt, *A History of Hand Knitting* (Loveland, Colorado: Interweave Press, 1987), 28-29. As stated in an earlier note, Rutt's books covers the history of hand knitting from before 1500 C.E. to the present day. However, Rutt spends only five pages on his discussion of American Knitting.

¹⁰ There is an important distinction between hand knitting and machine knitting. This paper looks at American hand knitting which requires technique, patience and innovation. Note that the author's discussion of American knitting is in regard to American hand knitting.

¹¹ Anne L. Macdonald, *No Idle Hands: The Social History of American Knitting* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 3.

¹² Susan M. Strawn, *Knitting America: A Glorious Heritage from Warm Socks to High Art* (Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2007). 13-14.

¹³ *Ibid*, 15.

¹⁴ Anne L Macdonald, *No Idle Hands*, 33-36.

After the American Revolution and the founding of the New Republic, domesticity was at the heart of the American feminine ideal. Knitting embodied many of the social expectations of women of the time of wifehood and motherhood. As a daily activity for housewives, it became a popular subject for women's periodicals including *Godey's Magazine*, *Lady's Magazine* and *Harper's*, all of which provided the first published instructions for knitted garments.¹⁵ Knitting and knitting patterns became more fashionable during the nineteenth century and lace knitting became a popular way to make fancy gloves, shawls and purses, along with the use of silk and other exotic materials for knitted garments.¹⁶ These types of patterns indicate that women now knitted for both practical and aesthetic reasons, making their garments more aesthetically appealing to themselves and those who saw them. This shift from subsistence to fashionable knitting shows that knitters maintained pride in their work previously felt by knitters but also that knitting began to include contemporaneous beauty elements and feminine values of delicacy and motherhood.

Just as the Civil War marked differences in politics between the North and the South, differences in Southern knitting and Northern knitting were also present. By this time, machine knitting made it possible for larger and faster production of knitted articles. However, for Union soldiers, machine-knit socks were uncomfortable because of a seam that ran down the middle bottom of the foot. The Sanitary Commission urged women to eliminate soldiers' discomfort by hand knitting socks. Knitters in the South faced great difficulties due to the lack of fibers to produce what they and their soldiers needed. As the war progressed, Southern women became desperate to find materials with which to knit and some used the wool stuffing in mattresses, re-

¹⁵ Anne L. Macdonald, *No Idle Hands*, 49-53.

¹⁶ Susan M. Strawn, *Knitting America*, 29-35.

carded it, and wove it into clothes while others carded different types of fibers together and made socks.¹⁷

Again, America needed knitters upon entrance into World War I, and the Red Cross and yarn manufacturers put out advertisements asking women to knit for soldiers and civilians. By the end of the war, knitters knitted six and a half million items for refugees and over twenty million garments for the military.¹⁸ In World War II women's labor was needed not only for knitting, but for nursing on the front and in production work across the United States. As many women joined the cause in other areas of production, knitters picked up their needles again to support the war effort hysteria. Susan Strawn quoted a *Business Week* article that stated, "Hardly a woman...feels really comfortable about sitting down for a few minutes without an R.A.F. helmet or a refugee's sweater to work on."¹⁹

After the war, women returned to knitting for themselves and their families. During the 1950s, many women married by the age of twenty, and the number of female college students dwindled, and the number of births rose.²⁰ In 1953, 25.9% of the eighteen to nineteen year old female population attended college but in 1954, the number dropped to 6.0% of the female population ages twenty to twenty-four. The extreme decrease indicates that many women did not stay in college past their first or second years.²¹ Knitting seemed to go hand in hand with wifehood and motherhood. In keeping with the domestic ideology of the time, yarn companies endorsed slogans such as "Knit for the Man in Your Life," "Knit to Make him Proud of You,"

¹⁷ Ibid, 41-48. Carding is the process of taking raw fleece and working it into longer and more even fibers so it can be more easily spun into yarn.

¹⁸ Anne L. Macdonald, *No Idle Hands*, 199-201.

¹⁹ Susan M. Strawn, *Knitting America*, 137-138.

²⁰ Ibid, 157-158.

²¹ U.S. Department of Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1955).

and “Put Those Adorable Babies into Knits!”²² Although women certainly knit for themselves during this time, they were cheerily encouraged to put their husbands and children first in line for knitted garments.

During the late 1940s and 1950s, designs and patterns characteristic to other regions of the world, such as argyle socks and Scandinavian sweaters, became especially popular as subjects for knitting books and patterns. This again demonstrates a shift from subsistence or practical knitting back to knitting for fashion and entertainment. Knitting for practicality needs only to entail simple knit and purl techniques but color changes, cables and patterning evident in knitting in the 1950s show that American knitting again emphasized fashion over the warmth or purpose of the garment.²³

Elizabeth Zimmermann entered the American knitting world in 1955 with a Norwegian sweater pattern featured in *Women’s Day*. Zimmermann’s Norwegian sweater pattern fit into the popularity of worldly knits among knitters, but she wrote the pattern in a conversational style which helped readers connect to her and she designed the pattern to be knitted in the round.²⁴ This meant that the knitter did not have to piece the sweater together at the end nor did the knitter have to purl. Zimmermann’s instructions and advice to knitters about designing their own patterns revolutionized American knitting. Anne Macdonald explained that she “turned math-anxiety-prone, totally-dependent-upon-printed-instructions knitters into creatively confident” knitters.²⁵

²² Anne L. Macdonald, *No Idle Hands*, 321-322.

²³ The purl stitch is the opposite of a knit stitch – the backside of a purl stitch looks exactly like a knit stitch. Most knitters learn the knit stitch before learning how to purl, purling is usually seen as slightly more cumbersome than the knit stitch.

²⁴ Susan M. Strawn, *Knitting America*, 162-163.

²⁵ Anne L. Macdonald, *No Idle Hands*, 336-337.

American knitting embodied many early American ideals regarding production and the ability to provide goods for soldiers during wartime. As knitting shifted away from practical production, it began to take on more fashion-oriented techniques such as lace knitting and incorporated foreign designs and styles. Even though early women colonists took knitting from the “Old World” and brought it to their new homes in North America, American knitters developed their own sense of style and use for their craft. These earlier American knitting characteristics allowed designers and knitters like Elizabeth Zimmermann to further develop and embody American knitting ideals.

III. The “Opinionated Knitter”²⁶ and the Camp

A. Biographical Information: Immigrant, Knitter, Writer and Mother

Elizabeth Zimmermann, born Elizabeth Lloyd-Jones, was born in London in 1910, and grew up in Kent and Essex. As a young girl, Zimmermann learned to knit from her Auntie Pete, who let young Zimmermann learn on a project already on needles. As a young woman, Zimmermann attended art schools in Lausanne, Switzerland and München, Bavaria.²⁷ She married Arnold Zimmermann in 1937, and shortly thereafter they moved to Long Island, NY where he worked in the brewing industry.²⁸ The Zimmermanns emigrated for political reasons, as Arnold Zimmermann had endangered his profession and life through criticism of the Nazi

²⁶ Elizabeth Zimmermann referred to herself as the Opinionated Knitter in a journal entry published in *The Opinionated Knitter*, a compilation of newsletters, pictures, and journal entries.

²⁷ See Appendix B for a picture of Zimmermann during her years in Germany while attending different art schools. This picture is of her in her dirndl.

²⁸ Elizabeth Zimmermann, *The Opinionated Knitter*, 5.

regime.²⁹ Once in the U.S., as Meg Swansen explained, the couple “immediately set out to become citizens,” of which Zimmermann was very proud. Swansen also explained that her mother also thought of “Americans as being so generous to take a German and a Brit.”³⁰ The couple moved from Long Island and lived in New Hope, PA and eventually moved to Milwaukee, WI for his career.³¹ Their three children, Thomas, Lloie and Meg were born in 1938, 1940, and 1942. After her husband retired in 1972 as the Director of Brewing Operations for Schlitz in Milwaukee, the couple moved to a central Wisconsin schoolhouse near Pittsville, WI.³²

As a mother, Zimmermann engaged her children in cultural activities. Her children grew up listening to stories by Jane Austin, Thackeray, and the Brontë sisters along with singing and reciting poetry. The Zimmermanns loved movies and took their children to the Art House in Milwaukee which showed a new foreign film every week.³³ Zimmermann taught Swansen how to knit at age four or five by having Swansen sit on her lap while she “guid[ed] [her] hands through the natural awkwardness of learning a new skill.”³⁴

Zimmermann began designing when in college but began her career as a knitting designer in 1955. At the same time, she started a “mail-order knitting-supply business” where people wrote letters that explained what they wanted and contained the payment.³⁵ She never wanted an actual physical yarn shop that people could visit because that required owners to be there all of the time. As Swansen explained,

A shop had no appeal to her at all; she’d have to be there every day to tend it. Although knitting was definitely entwined in all aspects of her life, she had many

²⁹ Elizabeth Zimmermann, *Knitting Around* (Pittsville, Wisconsin: Schoolhouse Press, 1989), 142-143. The entire account of Arnold Zimmermann’s escape, in his own words, can be read on pages 142-143 of *Knitting Around*.

³⁰ Meg Swansen, September 18, 2009.

³¹ See Appendix C for a picture of the couple.

³² Elizabeth Zimmermann, *The Opinionated Knitter*, 5.

³³ Swansen, September 18, 2009.

³⁴ Meg Swansen, *Knitting: 30 Designs for Hand Knitting* (Loveland, Colorado: Interweave Press, 1999), 4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

other interests. She was empathetic to shop owners and thought them under-appreciated; they led a thankless life and she didn't want any part of that. So mail-order was the obvious way to.³⁶

Despite not wanting to have all of the answers, Zimmermann later became a knitting figure that many women and knitters looked to for advice, inspiration, and comfort. The mail-order business allowed Zimmermann to travel and focus on designing and her own knitting. Although Zimmermann also did not network with many knitting designers, she and her husband had many friends in the arts and belonged to the Walrus Club while they lived in Milwaukee.³⁷ Since most of Zimmermann's friends were involved in the arts instead of knitting and design, she was isolated as a knitter just as many other American knitters were at the time.

When *Women's Day Magazine* published Zimmermann's first big article in 1955, a Norwegian sweater, and the publishers did not edit or rewrite her pattern. Her conversational pattern writing style proved to be just what American knitters needed and the response this article received prompted Zimmermann to keep producing articles and patterns this way. According to Swansen, Zimmermann found that most knitting patterns were "didactic, abbreviated and unintelligible," but Zimmermann wrote in a way that captured peoples' attention, knitters or not.³⁸ Her pattern began,

I had, all my life, determinedly set my face against making any form of Norwegian Ski Sweater for what I consider four excellent reasons: *One* – I hate purling back; *two* – I hate twisting yarns at each color change; *three* – I hate complicated graphs and translating dots, asterisks, and funny squiggles into colors; *four* – and much of the worst, I hate the interminable putting down of one color and picking up the other whenever the pattern demands it – sometimes every second stitch.³⁹

³⁶ Swansen, September 18, 2009.

³⁷ Swansen, September 18, 2009. The Walrus Club was a prominent artist and patrons group in Milwaukee at the time.

³⁸ Meg Swansen, September 18, 2009.

³⁹ Zimmermann's pattern was reproduced in Susan Strawn's *Knitting America*, 163.

Many of Zimmermann's patterns began this way which eased knitters into their new project and made them feel more comfortable with a challenging pattern.

In 1958, *Vogue* published Zimmermann's Aran sweater pattern which was the first published in the United States.⁴⁰ The Aran sweater was not only a new style in American hand-knitting fashion, but also represented slightly different techniques than those of traditional American knitting. She never received payment for the design other than having her name and mailing information printed as the designer of the pattern. The publication of these two patterns got Zimmermann's name into the knitting world not only as a knitting designer but as a carrier of "unbleached Sheepswool," which was hard to find in the U.S. market. Zimmermann very much despised anything acrylic, a common synthetic yarn material in America at the time, and preferred sheepswool to any other fiber.⁴¹ The requests for Zimmermann's sheepswool was the push that she needed to get her mail-order business off the ground.

Just as the success of Zimmermann's articles in both *Women's Day* and *Vogue* encouraged her to start her own mail-order business, a set-back prompted her to self publish her patterns in "homemade" newsletters. After moving to Milwaukee, Zimmermann began writing her own knitting newsletters, which included a conversationally written pattern and often a letter describing other experiences not always knitting related. The push for Zimmermann to write her own knitting newsletters came after Bernat Magazine published one of her fair-isle yoke sweaters in their college issue. As Swansen explained, "the editors had completely changed her instructions from a circular, seamless yoke, to a sweater knitted in pieces and sewn together. They had even gone so far as to superimpose a seam down the side of body." Zimmermann, staunchly pro-circular knitting which requires no seams down the sides of garments, "was

⁴⁰ An Aran sweater is an Irish cabled sweater. An example can be seen in Appendix D, "Circular Knitting."

⁴¹ Elizabeth Zimmermann, *The Opinionated Knitter*, 70.

furious, and said, "never again". She was through selling designs to magazines and began her own Newsletter, with her 'real' directions; that's how this business began."⁴² Anyone who spent five dollars during the six months before a newsletter went out automatically received a free one.⁴³ It was here that newsletters like *Wool Gathering* and *Spun Out* were born.

Another frustrating moment in Zimmermann's knitting career came during her fight to gain membership in the Wisconsin Designer Craftsmen (WDC). The WDC sought "to promote the highest expression of the artist-craftsman through individual work and group display."⁴⁴ Zimmermann's name first appeared on the Wisconsin Designer Craftsmen membership list in 1960, years after she moved to Wisconsin. Despite her admittance in 1960, the WDC "rejected her entries year after year" before eventually accepting her work into the shows. Once the WDC accepted her, she was able to submit entries every year. Swansen stated that she felt Zimmermann's rejections could be attributed due to the judges' pejorative attitudes regarding knitting.⁴⁵ However, she persevered and her work became well-known regionally, nationally and internationally.

The WDC shows had a fiber arts category that included weaving, stitching, fabrics and knitting design. In 1962, Elizabeth Zimmermann was the only person who submitted knitting entries, compared to thirty-one entries in weaving and eight years later, she was still the only member submitting knitted articles into the shows. Zimmermann's conflict with the WDC seems to be grounded less in her gender than in the gendered medium of her expression; women were well-represented not only in the fiber arts category but also in other areas. The other reason for her late admittance, possibly prompted by the lack of knitting entries, may also have been

⁴² See appendix D for an example of straight knitting versus circular knitting.

⁴³ Swansen, September 18, 2009.

⁴⁴ Wisconsin Designer Craftsmen, *Wisconsin Designer Craftsmen Records, 1937-1973*.

⁴⁵ Swansen, September 18, 2009.

because the judges did not see knitting as a craft. If knitting was not considered a craft until her admittance, Zimmermann's struggle would have been gender-related because the judges may have seen knitting as too domestic of an activity to be considered a legitimate craft. Regardless of her struggle for recognition, in 1965 Harold J. Brennan, dean of Fine Arts for the Rochester Institute of Technology and the director for the School for American Craftsmen judged a show in which Zimmermann entered her knitting. The newsletter after the show stated "he was captivated by the fabrics, especially the woven and knitted clothing. Seems other shows do not have such work submitted and he was delighted to see this direction."⁴⁶ Brennan's comment applied directly to Zimmermann, as she was the only one who submitted knitted articles in the show.

After publishing patterns in several magazines, Zimmermann, still in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, turned to television. Zimmermann's television knitting series, "The Busy Knitter," appeared in 1964 on WMVS, the local PBS station, and reached knitters who were out of reach of knitting mentors and communities. At first only shown to local audiences, her first series and later her second series "The Busy Knitter II," were broadcasted nationwide and reached even more knitters.⁴⁷ After moving to Pittsville, WI, Zimmermann also published three knitting videos titled *Knitting Workshop*, *Knitting Around*, and *Knitting Glossary*.⁴⁸

Although Zimmermann self published many of her patterns; Fireside published her first book in 1971 and left her patterns and conversational writing alone. Zimmermann explained in *Knitting Around* that Barbara Walker, another prominent American knitter and designer, recommended that Fireside Press was a good fiber craft oriented press that would not over edit

⁴⁶ Wisconsin Designer Craftsmen, *Wisconsin Designer Craftsmen Records, 1937-1973*.

⁴⁷ Shirley A. Scott, "Elizabeth Zimmermann: A Tribute to 50 Years of Inspiration," in *Vogue Knitting*. http://www.vogueknitting.com/magazine/article_archive/elizabeth_zimmerman.aspx (accessed October 22, 2009).

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Zimmermann, *The Opinionated Knitter*, 4.

Zimmermann's writing.⁴⁹ *Knitting Without Tears: Basic Techniques and Easy-To-Follow Directions for Garments to Fit All Sizes* guided unsure and hesitant knitters through easy and difficult areas of knitting. In this book, also referred to as *KWT*, Zimmermann described the importance of knitting with wool and wool alone, proper gauge and how to manipulate a pattern to an individual's gauge using Elizabeth's Percentage System (EPS), as well as patterns that implemented many of the various techniques described in the text.⁵⁰ Gauge refers to the number of stitches to one inch and usually frustrates knitters to make their personal gauge fit what a pattern requires. Instead, Zimmermann's EPS allowed knitters to change patterns based on their own personal gauge which also encouraged them to design for themselves instead of following written patterns.

If *Knitting Without Tears* introduced the idea of designing, Zimmermann's second book, *Knitter's Almanac (KA)* re-enforced and further encouraged knitters to do so. More autobiographical than *KWT*, Zimmermann's *KA*, published the same year that the knitting camp started in 1974, provided patterns for every month of the year and included stories about vacations, day trips and thoughts alongside her patterns.⁵¹ This book, possibly more than any other, proved to be the greatest comfort for many knitters. Her readers responded very positively to her writing and began considering her a friend rather than a distant knitting designer. Zimmermann not only captivated her readers through her conversational writing style but also by the way she engaged her readers by discussing common frustrations among knitters about patterns, techniques and life in general.⁵²

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Zimmermann, *Knitting Around*, 177.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Zimmermann, *Knitting Without Tears: Basic Techniques and Easy-To-Follow Directions for Garments to Fit All Sizes* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971).

⁵¹ Elizabeth Zimmermann, *Knitter's Almanac: Projects for Each Month of the Year* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1974).

⁵² Swansen, September 18, 2009.

Schoolhouse Press, the Zimmermann family publishing and yarn business, published her three final books. Schoolhouse Press, originally only a mail-order knitting and supply business, published Zimmermann's *Knitting Workshop* because it had been "rejected" from "several publishers." The family felt it "important" that Zimmermann publish another book and they rented the equipment in order to put out her third book. She also wrote another book in 1989 titled *Knitting Around*. Schoolhouse Press also published Zimmermann's videos by renting the equipment from the local high school in Pittsville, later renting more professional equipment from Minneapolis to tape the final takes. Her fifth book, *The Opinionated Knitter*, published posthumously in 2005, contains all of her newsletters from 1958-1968. Zimmermann had hoped to title her first book that because that is what she called herself, but the publisher decided against it.⁵³ Since the early 1980s when the business first incorporated publishing, Schoolhouse Press has published approximately thirty books that larger publishing companies usually reject.⁵⁴

While not overtly political, she and Swansen "let a bit of non-violence and Pacifism infiltrate [their] knitting." During the Vietnam War, Swansen stated

She was politically involved and we even let a bit of Pacifism infiltrate our knitting publications. During the Vietnam War we used stickers from Another Mother for Peace: "War is Not Healthy for Children and Other Living Things". We ran in a Wool Gathering; a series of drawings: A woman knitting and next to her are the silhouettes of a bunch of ICBMs, and as she's knitting the thread which forms the outline of the bombs. The caption read, "If we can risk war, we can risk disarmament."

While Zimmermann may have been politically active during the anti-war movement, Swansen, who considered herself a feminist, said that she and her mother would get into heated debates about feminism because Zimmermann felt the movement unnecessary at first. Although supporting some of the Second Wave feminist agenda, such as equal pay, Zimmermann never

⁵³ Elizabeth Zimmermann, *The Opinionated Knitter*, 5.

⁵⁴ Swansen, September 18, 2009.

considered herself a feminist. Swansen, on the other hand, explained that she feels her mother was a feminist in a “non-overt way” because of her lifestyle - “she did what she wanted to do.”⁵⁵

Zimmermann retired from publishing and teaching in 1989 so she could focus on more important things like her grandchildren.⁵⁶ On November 30, 1999, Zimmermann died at the age of 89. The family waited several days before having news of her death released. Within a matter of hours after the release, the *New York Times* called and published her obituary in their Sunday edition.⁵⁷ Swansen explained that Zimmermann’s obituary took up half a page “which [was] just unheard of. Even for the CEO of General Motors they had a little tiny obit.”⁵⁸ Swansen also was interviewed by both NPR and CBC public radio, a Toronto radio station. The family thought that they knew the extent of Zimmermann’s popularity but they did not know how far reaching it really was until after her death.⁵⁹ As the *New York Times* obituary described, Zimmermann’s percentage system helped knitters write their own patterns and “gently urged knitters to challenge the limits of their imaginations.”⁶⁰

B. The Camp: A Closer Look

Zimmermann published *Knitter’s Almanac* the same year she founded the knitting camp, the first in the United States, at University of Wisconsin Extension – Shell Lake.⁶¹ By this point, many from the knitting world were familiar with Zimmermann, and knitters wanted and needed an institution like the Knitting Camp in order to be part of a community of people with the same

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Zimmermann, *Knitting Around*, 181.

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Zimmermann, *The Opinionated Knitter*, 120.

⁵⁸ Swansen, September 18, 2009.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Zimmermann, *The Opinionated Knitter*, 120.

⁶⁰ *New York Times*, “E. Zimmermann is Dead at 89; Revolutionized Art of Knitting,” Sunday, December 12, 1999. <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/12/12/us/e-zimmermann-is-dead-at-89-revolutionized-art-of-knitting.html> (accessed December 7, 2009).

⁶¹ Meg Swansen, *Knitting*, 10.

love and passion as their own. The actual idea of the camp was not originally Zimmermann's but that of Charlene Burningham who approached Zimmermann about teaching a class due to many knitters who asked to have one offered.⁶² Charlene Burningham taught a week long class at Shell Lake in the area of textiles and fibers during the same week Zimmermann taught.⁶³ Although Zimmermann did not come up with the idea of the camp; the content and requirements of the camp was "entirely Elizabeth" and Swansen assisted.⁶⁴

Before looking into the actual camp itself, changes took place in the UW-Extension programs as a whole prior to 1974 when the camp started. In 1969, Henry L. Ahlgren became the second chancellor for the UW-Extension and with this came changes, challenges, and lofty goals. Ahlgren's main goal was to make higher education more widely available to everyone state-wide. The outreach he referred to was the merger of several institutions into what was called the UW-Extension.⁶⁵

The actual merger of the Cooperative Extension, University Extension Division, and WHA Radio-Television programs took place in 1965 and became the University of Wisconsin – Extension. The Cooperative Extension referred to the link between the Department of Agriculture and Wisconsin colleges. The University Extension Division or the General Extension focused on education outside of agriculture.⁶⁶ When Ahlgren became chancellor, the new system merger had not yet worked the way he wanted but he wanted to make it happen. The various mergers unified the system which made access to education more available and gave more opportunities to students.

⁶² Swansen, September 18, 2009.

⁶³ "Workshops in Fiber and Textile Techniques," August 5-9, 1974. 18/5/00/1 Box 1 University Extension Records. Art Education. University of Wisconsin - Madison Archives. Madison, WI.

⁶⁴ Swansen, September 18, 2009.

⁶⁵ Grace Witter White, *Cooperative Extension in Wisconsin: 1962-1982* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1985), 26.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 5-11.

Not only did changes occur in the system in its entirety but changes also took place in home economics and textiles. As Jerry Apps explained in *The People Came First*, the term “home economics” became more frequently referred to as “family living programs” and went beyond the basic constructing of clothes and making food. The emphasis turned from more traditional programs like clothing construction to programs focused on families and health. However, those who were more traditional opposed these changes and worried about the state of the more traditional areas. Despite the disagreements about the new direction of home economics, the earlier, more traditional programs and newer programs were integrated into the Extension program.⁶⁷

The changes in University Wisconsin Extension as a whole along with those in home economics programs offered more educational opportunities to Wisconsinites from a wider variety of interests. Changes in home economics not only provided new and innovative programs but kept the original, traditional programs as a basis for learning. The incorporation of traditional classes that embodied domestic ideals like clothing construction and cooking with newer classes focused on health and family stability allowed preservation and innovation on the part of the family living programs. These events laid the foundation for programs like the Shell-Lake Knitting Camp which catered to knitters who also wanted the opportunity to receive college credit for attending.

The Shell Lake knitting camp began in 1974 and twelve to fifteen campers attended the first year.⁶⁸ Campers could attend the camp either for recreation or for credit where they would receive one or two continuing education credits, or “CE” credits. Zimmermann did not design the

⁶⁷ Jerry Apps, *The People Came First: A History of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension* (Madison, Wisconsin: Wisconsin Epsilon Sigma Alpha Sigma Chapter, 2002), 101-102.

⁶⁸ See Appendix E for a map of Wisconsin that indicates where Pittsville, WI and Shell Lake, WI are located.

camp to be a teaching-from-scratch experience; all campers had to know the fundamentals of knitting, including casting on, casting off, increasing, decreasing, the knit stitch, and the purl stitch. For those taking the camp for credit, Zimmermann designed a project for them to complete that had to be graded at the end of the week. For example, one year the campers knitted anything that could be worn on a head. One camper knitted a tea cozy and placed it on her head.⁶⁹ Another year the students were graded on a pair of gloves knitted side-ways.⁷⁰ Even though Zimmermann could teach the class and set the requirements for the graded projects due at the end of the week, she could not grade the projects because she did not have a college diploma. Instead, someone who did not knit but had a college degree graded the projects.⁷¹

In the early years of the camp, Zimmermann and Swansen started at either end of the class room and showed techniques to small groups of knitters. As Swansen explained, Zimmermann had no concrete plan for the camp but instead planned by the “seat of the pants” and adapted the structure of the individual camp weeks based on questions, requests and comments from the campers themselves.⁷² Deb Olson, born in Milwaukee, WI and a knitter since she was five years old, attended Zimmermann’s camp for the first time in 1982. At the time of the camp, Olson, her husband and four children lived in Clintonville, WI. She explained that Zimmermann was “very, very organized” and sat in front and talked “about everything,” not just knitting.⁷³ Lois Young, born in Chicago, IL learned to knit when she was ten years old but did not knit seriously until she attended college. Young has not missed a camp since the first in 1974. Young explained that Zimmermann was “relaxed” and allowed for campers to interject if

⁶⁹ Swansen, September 18, 2009.

⁷⁰ Lois Young, interview by author, Wausau, Wisconsin and Houghton, Michigan, September 20, 2009.

⁷¹ Swansen, September 18, 2009.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Deb Olson, interview by author, Wausau, Wisconsin, September 18, 2009.

they had questions or needed help.⁷⁴ Zimmermann may not have had a concrete plan for the camps but it did not come across this way to the attendees.

Campers felt they got to know Zimmermann and her personality both in and outside the classroom. As Deb Olson explained, Zimmermann added her own personal remarks to different techniques or different knitted projects. For example, she explained that anything could be knitted, even a skirt, but that personally Zimmermann “wouldn’t because [her] body [didn’t] fit in a skirt.”⁷⁵ These types of informal remarks made campers feel more comfortable and connected to her. Zimmermann’s personality seemed constant in and out of the classroom and as Lois Young explained, she sat next to Zimmerman at a music program held at Shell Lake one evening during the week - the day that Nixon resigned. Young did not care for President Richard M. Nixon but felt sorry for him because the television networks showed the story over and over that whole day. She mentioned that she “almost felt sorry for him” and Zimmermann responded: “Nonsense, he was a bastard and he got what he deserved.” Young was surprised and somewhat comforted by Zimmermann’s comment because “she was just a person like the rest” of the campers and connected to them by being herself.⁷⁶

IV. Knitting’s Significance

A. The Campers’ Experiences

The camp itself was revolutionary for American knitters, but the campers’ experiences were and are even more important. During the earlier years of the camp, 1974-1982, many women who attended found that the camp dramatically changed their lives. The experiences

⁷⁴ Young, September 20, 2009.

⁷⁵ Olson, September 18, 2009.

⁷⁶ Young, September 20, 2009.

ranged from meeting Zimmermann and learning new knitting techniques, to learning more about themselves and their abilities. The camp also created new communities for knitters that were unfamiliar to many, especially those living in central and rural areas of Wisconsin.

The camp ran one week and most of the campers lived outside of the Shell Lake area and sometimes out of the state. This meant that most stayed in the dormitories on the Shell Lake campus. Many attendees had husbands and children at home and had never left for a whole week to do something entirely for themselves. Lois Young recalled that when she first attended, she and her husband had not yet had children and that “he [was] plenty capable of taking care of himself.” Yet, when the couple adopted their two children, Young stated that there “was no question,” that she would continue to go and they hired babysitters to take care of their daughters.⁷⁷ When Deb Olson attended in 1982, her mother-in-law took her children for two weeks while Olson attended the knitting camp and another camp the following week.⁷⁸ Having families did not deter these women from attending the camp, even though it was a new experience for them to leave their children behind.

The campers’ new experiences also affect them on more of an individual and personal level. Young explained that she never had gone anywhere by herself to do something solely for herself before attending Zimmermann’s camp.⁷⁹ Similar to Young, Olson experienced something that she was unconscious of not doing until she actually had the chance to do it at the camp.

That’s probably the first time that on my own I was in a situation where I had to go eat for supper and stuff like that with a bunch of women cause I’d never done that before, I mean it’s not the same as when you travel and you just go to a hamburger stand. It’s not the same as when you go with your family or when you’re in college because you have the college places that you go to and stuff. So it was a little different, I wasn’t apprehensive but when I think back about it, that

⁷⁷ Young, September 20, 2009.

⁷⁸ Olson, September 18, 2009.

⁷⁹ Young, September 20, 2009.

was kind of something that I really hadn't done before, and I didn't even realize that I hadn't done it before.⁸⁰

Young's and Olson's individual experiences at camp made them feel a different sense of freedom that they had not yet had.

While some campers stayed in hotels or at campgrounds during the early camp years, the majority stayed in the dorms on campus. Campers checked in the evening before camp started at the dorms, met their roommates, and ate supper.⁸¹ As Young stated,

I stayed at the dorm, and boy it was your basic bare-bones dorm. What I remember about the dorm was they had bunk beds made out of two single beds put on a frame, one on the other so that the top bunk had wheels on the bottom. And there was a ladder and it was sort of screwed into the bunk on the other side of the wall.

Young, one of the youngest at the first camp, slept on the top bunk and said that when she first attended that her room was across from the showers. One shower had a loose faucet and every time Young was almost asleep, someone knocked the faucet on the floor and woke her up.⁸²

Despite the dorms not being an overly commodious place to stay, that did not deter Young from attending every year since the beginning.

Although some campers attended the camp for fun and to learn new techniques; both Young and Olson took the camp for college credit. Young explained that she did not take the class for credit her first year and could crochet in the afternoons since she did not have to complete a final graded project. However, in following years she took the camp for credit, and her project received a grade at the end of the week. At the time, Young taught math and had to take additional credit to keep her teaching certification and the credits from Zimmermann's camp

⁸⁰ Olson, September 18, 2009.

⁸¹ Olson, September 18, 2009.

⁸² Young, September 20, 2009.

fulfilled the credit requirements that Young needed.⁸³ Olson, who also needed continuing education credits to keep her teaching certificate, took the camp for credit in 1982 and explained that she experienced the camp differently than others who attended. She got to talk to people when they all ate supper together, but while class was in session, Olson took notes, practiced, and focused on what she wanted to do for her graded project. The criteria for her project had to be anything that incorporated color changes, cables, a circle start, both increasing and decreasing, an i-cord and a button hole. She had more on the line than other attendees not taking the class for credit and used class breaks to refine new techniques and practice on swatches. She also had to come up with her project from scratch and used any free-time during the class to come up with ideas.⁸⁴

Zimmermann did not design her camp as a feminist institution, but rather a knitting institution. Olson and Young, however, perceived it as a feminist experience. As Young explained, although she was never a “raging” feminist, she did consider herself one and felt empowerment through Zimmermann’s writing and the camp.⁸⁵ Olson, when asked if she considered herself a feminist, stated: “Border-line feminist. Not Jane Fonda but I could see her points. I never burned a bra but I certainly didn’t wear one all the time when I probably could have.” She also gave insight into how others’ may have felt about feminism by explaining that she became a little more of a feminist after attending camp because of other women especially those from places like Chicago.⁸⁶ This not only provides insight into how some campers felt about feminism, but it also provides information about the subjects of conversations the campers

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Olson, September 18, 2009.

⁸⁵ Young, September 20, 2009.

⁸⁶ Olson, September 18, 2009.

had. The conversations were not just knitting related but included discussions about life, politics and personal philosophies.

Deb Olson also explained how she balanced her love of knitting and her home life with four children and a husband outside of camp. While in camp, knitters could focus solely on knitting, but outside of camp, as Olson stated, many had families, jobs and other obligations. Olson got her first exercise bike right around the time she started knitting more. In order to balance her time she would watch television while exercising on her bike and would have her yarn on the stairs next to her bike so she could also knit at the same time. She said that if her children were still awake, they and her husband would be on the couch watching T.V. while she biked. Olson remembered not actually sitting down to knit except for in the car until she got older and her children had grown. Otherwise she had to knit while doing other activities.⁸⁷

Zimmermann's camp provided new experiences to attendees whether they took the camp for fun or for credit. Not only did they meet fellow knitters but they also experienced being away from their families and had to adjust to staying in the dorms and finding places to eat. For them, camp was not only about learning new techniques but about being in the same space with others who loved knitting. For those who attended for credit, University Wisconsin Extension Shell-Lake made continuing education more readily available by doing something they loved while learning at the same time.

B. The Art and Craft of Knitting: Feminism In Action

Although the argument of art and craft in knitting is not highly political, the ability for women to participate in such a debate in itself is a political act. In her book, *The Saturated World: Aesthetic Meaning, Intimate Objects, Women's Lives, 1890-1940*, Beverly Gordon

⁸⁷ Olson, September 18, 2009.

examines “domestic amusements” among women in late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries. Gordon explains that women’s doll making, party games, and dress-up have been viewed by scholars and society alike as trivial and insignificant hobbies. Yet Gordon specifically argues that these women lived under “social constraints,” but were not just by-standers who conformed to these social ideologies. Rather, these women, within these limitations, chose to act and react to their situations the way they did. In other words, women may have been defined using those limitations, however they chose how they filled up their time. These types of activities gave women events to look forward to as well as a social life apart from their families.⁸⁸

Gordon also explains that other traditionally domestic activities like needlework and other forms of domestic textiles, body adornment, charity bazaars, and Indian beaded “whimsies” have been given a similar dismissal of triviality. Gordon set out to prove that women’s domestic arts did have aesthetic value by explaining the emotional experiences attached to such activities. The emotional experiences included the ability for these women to enjoy an activity and form friendships with other women through a shared past time. Her argument also outlines that these types of activities usually involve the sense of touch which is one of the first “ways of knowing” for children which also continues through to adulthood. Needlework and other types of female aesthetics require the tactile experience that reaches to the core of human knowledge.⁸⁹ Traditional female domestic arts allow for a more aesthetic experience since they relate to more tactile experiences.

Similar dismissals have been given to knitting, trivializing not only its social function, but also what it meant for those who participated. Knitting is also very tactile, as Gordon argued,

⁸⁸ Beverly Gordon, *The Saturated World: Aesthetic Meaning, Intimate Objects, Women’s Lives, 1890-1940* (Knoxville, Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, 2006) 11-15.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 14-20.

which allows knitters to connect with their craft and what they produce. Knitters take their knitting and the knitting camp seriously because of the interaction it facilitated. However, knitting also enters into the art, that is aesthetic, world. With this, knitters produce aesthetically pleasing as well as practical items. Knitting is therefore both craft and art.

As Swansen explained, Zimmermann was “proud of her craft...She did not consider craft a derogatory term” as it sometimes is now. However, Zimmermann never called herself or considered herself an artist.⁹⁰ Young stated that knitting is both art and craft. Craft applies to knitting when refining techniques and making a garment fit whereas the art of knitting applies when designing new garments or changing an existing pattern to fit an individual’s taste or knitting style.⁹¹ Similarly, Olson explained that the “process [of knitting] is a craft...but what [is] produc[ed] is an art.”⁹²

In Zimmermann’s unpublished scrapbooks, many women wrote letters to her referencing knitting and their ‘art’ or their ‘craft’. In 1974, one woman explained knitting as “this fascinating art of ours.” While M. Anderson, in regard to a pair of mittens she knitted for daughter, stated, “because I considered them a work of art I decided to take some extra precautions” in their design. In 1978 another woman enthusiastically related to Zimmermann her excitement that knitting was considered an “art form.”⁹³ While knitting remained an art for some, others referred to it as a craft. One fan wrote to Zimmermann about how she had knitted on and off for many years but that she had a love for the craft. Another woman wrote to Zimmermann and referred to

⁹⁰ Swansen, September 18, 2009.

⁹¹ Young, September 20, 2009.

⁹² Olson, September 18, 2009.

⁹³ Elizabeth Zimmermann, Scrapbook, Private Collection.

Zimmermann's own knitting as a craft while another discussed how knitters bring their craft into their everyday lives.⁹⁴

This argument of art versus craft pertains to feminism because women found power through knitting. As a craft, knitting ties women to a female lineage of knowledge, skill, and production. At the same time, the art of knitting allows women to proclaim themselves as creators and claim authorship of their work. For knitters, art and craft are inseparable and flow evenly in and out of one another. It is through knitting that knitters project themselves, their lives and their passion. For them, knitting is more than just sitting down with a pair of needles, it is the ability to produce something that embodies both the practical and beautiful simultaneously.

V. Conclusion: Zimmermann's Legacy

Elizabeth Zimmermann began to make an impact on, women, particularly knitters, when her first book came out, *Knitting Without Tears*. One main premise of the book urged knitters to stop being "blind followers." Zimmermann firmly believed in not following patterns line for line or word for word and instead believed in designing for an individual's own style, gauge and appeal. Zimmermann's book not only helped knitters completely dependent on written patterns but also those who had just started designing. *Knitting Without Tears* "changed my [Young's] whole life" because it gave her the power to take control of her own knitting and made her feel more comfortable designing.⁹⁵ Similarly, in Joan Teshima's letter to Zimmermann, she stated, "the book's advocacy of being the master of one's knitting opened my eyes to a more versatile, sensible and creative way to knit." Not only did knitters read *Knitting Without Tears* to learn

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Young, September 20, 2009.

more about knitting but others read it for comfort. As one woman wrote, she re-read her book because she felt “a little below par” and turned to Zimmermann’s book to uplift her spirit.⁹⁶

Just as *Knitting Without Tears* impacted and changed knitters, so did Zimmermann’s second book *Knitter’s Almanac*. Many found this book not only insightful but “fun” and “funny” to read while others read it as if they would a novel. Mae R. Sazama told Zimmermann in a letter that reading *Knitter’s Almanac* was “like visiting with a friend.” Similarly, a first grade teacher wrote in about feeling as though she had sat down with a friend to talk about knitting while reading Zimmermann’s book which also helped her get through her long days of teaching first graders. Some even began their letters explaining they never wrote a fan letter to anyone until they read *Knitter’s Almanac*.⁹⁷

Letters to Zimmermann not only addressed books and techniques but what she meant to those who looked to her for advice and as a friend. Joan Fink wrote in a letter to Zimmermann in 1979 that she felt as though they knew each other and thanked Zimmermann for “making [her] life a little richer.” Another woman explained that Zimmermann added to her life which is no easy task since Zimmermann had not met many of her fans. Many women addressed Zimmermann as their friend because of how much they knew about her from the stories in her books. For example, one woman wrote: “Dear Elizabeth, I hope you don’t mind if I call you that – I feel that we are already good friends...as I said before, I already think of you as a dear friend and kindred spirit.” Other stay at home mothers looked to Zimmermann’s newsletters for comfort and new projects when they felt down after their kids went back to school while other knitters picked up already-read Zimmermann texts to lift their spirits.⁹⁸ Zimmermann may not

⁹⁶ Elizabeth Zimmermann, Scrapbook, Private Collection.

⁹⁷ Elizabeth Zimmermann, Scrapbook, Private Collection.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

have seen herself as nor intended herself to be a champion for American women and knitters but many viewed her as such.

Although Zimmermann never considered herself a feminist; her philosophies of knitting and life in general struck a chord in many women to become more independent in their knitting and subsequently in their everyday lives. Many letters explained the freedom Zimmermann provided them through her ideas of self-design and controlling one's own knitting.⁹⁹ In a letter to Zimmermann from Mary Ellen B,¹⁰⁰ she wrote, "You are such a wise woman. Between those lines of wisdom about practical and efficient methods of creating garments is a whole philosophy of living which is equally inspiring. A joy of living, learning, sharing and wonder. Thanks!!"¹⁰¹

Lois Young explained that Zimmermann refused to buy patterns and empowered Young to do the same. Young eventually became a professional designer herself and even sold a pattern to Vogue this past Spring.¹⁰² Deb Olson reported that Zimmermann's philosophies of being in control applied to other parts of life and prompted her to take other classes in pottery or stained glass. She also said that after meeting and reading Zimmermann's work, Olson feels more comfortable buying books and figuring out how to do other projects she has never done before. If it had not been for the camp, Olson would have never felt the push to become the master of her own knitting and designing, nor would she have felt comfortable with the philosophy of "there's not a wrong way, it's your way" which provided for a different outlook on life.¹⁰³ Zimmermann did not set out to instill feminist ideals in women, but many of her practices and advice empowered women to become more independent in knitting and in their lives.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Last name un-readable.

¹⁰¹ Elizabeth Zimmermann, Scrapbook, Private Collection.

¹⁰² Young, September 20, 2009.

¹⁰³ Olson, September 18, 2009.

Just as knitters found inspiration in Zimmermann's words of encouragement and inspiration, one knitter related to Zimmermann's frustrations of knitting not being accepted into the art and craft world. Arlene Iescas wrote,

I am in agreement with your remarks about knitting being by passed as an art form in shows and so-called craft fairs. Here, it is almost totally ignored and I have repeatedly been turned down when trying to get a booth to display my art locally. But I constantly see women buying and wearing cheaply made import Arans and Shetland sweaters of poor quality yarn and design.¹⁰⁴

Zimmermann's writing touched on both feelings of empowerment as well as frustrations for knitters, of which her admirers could relate to both.

Yet Zimmermann's legacy reaches beyond feelings of independence and includes the creation of a community. Before Zimmermann's camp, books and television series, many knitters knitted in isolation. Olson explained that before attending camp, she did not have access to any knitting communities and that after her grandmother, her only knitting connection, died she knitted in a "vacuum" before going to the camp. She also said that the camp was revolutionary for that time and that she could not imagine her own mother or aunts having the opportunity when they were younger to leave home and attend a camp like Zimmermann's.¹⁰⁵ Young described her feeling of isolation as a knitter in the early 1970s and explained that knitters did not just gather and knit together the way they do today. Out of the camp, Young made friendships that she has to this day.¹⁰⁶ As Swansen stated, the camp felt like a family to many who attended because they were able to share their love of knitting, without having to explain why, with others who felt the same.¹⁰⁷ Today, knitters have access to online forums and blogs

¹⁰⁴ Elizabeth Zimmermann, Scrapbook, Private Collection.

¹⁰⁵ Olson, September 18, 2009.

¹⁰⁶ Young, September 20, 2009.

¹⁰⁷ Swansen, September 18, 2009.

and local knitting shops but back in the 1960s and 1970s, knitters, especially in more rural areas of Wisconsin, were almost alone in their craft.

The actual knitting camp legacy and the legacy of Zimmermann's business is also far reaching. The camp is no longer offered for credit; however, it has expanded from a single, one-week session to four one week sessions during the summer and is now held in Marshfield, WI, slightly north of Pittsville in Wood County. Due to the large number of people who were wait-listed for the larger summer camps, Schoolhouse Press added mini-camps held in the fall. This past summer, the camp celebrated its thirty-sixth year and has been attended by people from across the United States and also from people outside of the country. Some long-time attendees use the camp as a place of reunion each year because they live on opposite ends of the country. Despite the changes taken place in the camp, the basic premise of the camp has remained constant – the obsession with knitting and the ability to come together in pursuit of a shared love.¹⁰⁸ The family business is “still very firmly based on her philosophy and teachings... We never set out to become publishers, but our niche seems to be picking up books that the Big Guys don't want to touch.” To date, Schoolhouse Press has published thirty books, many of which would not have been published by large publishing companies.¹⁰⁹

Zimmermann's family did not know the far reaching extent of her legacy until after her death in November, 1999. The most touching response Zimmermann's family received from people across the country and world was that Zimmermann changed their lives.¹¹⁰ Towards the end of *The Opinionated Knitter*, excerpts from letters to the family about Zimmerman after her death included statements of appreciation, loss, and inspiration. Many included that Zimmermann changed their knitting and personal lives while others explained the comfort they

¹⁰⁸ Swansen, September, 18, 2009.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

found in her. One knitter stated, “I am crying now as I type; I feel like I lost my own mother. And in a way I have. Knitting is a sisterhood and Elizabeth was our mentor, our sister, our mother, our friend.”¹¹¹

Zimmermann firmly believed in doing what she wanted to do and not following others unless she decided it was the way she wanted. For knitters, she not only provided a philosophical approach to knitting but “embedded in her books and her writing and her approach to knitting was a way of living.”¹¹² Knitters share a bond due to the love of the activity but before the Internet and the burgeoning of local community knitting shops, Zimmermann embodied much of what knitters needed – a leader and friend to establish a way of living and an institution for shared knitting and life experiences.

¹¹¹ Elizabeth Zimmermann, *The Opinionated Knitter*, 122.

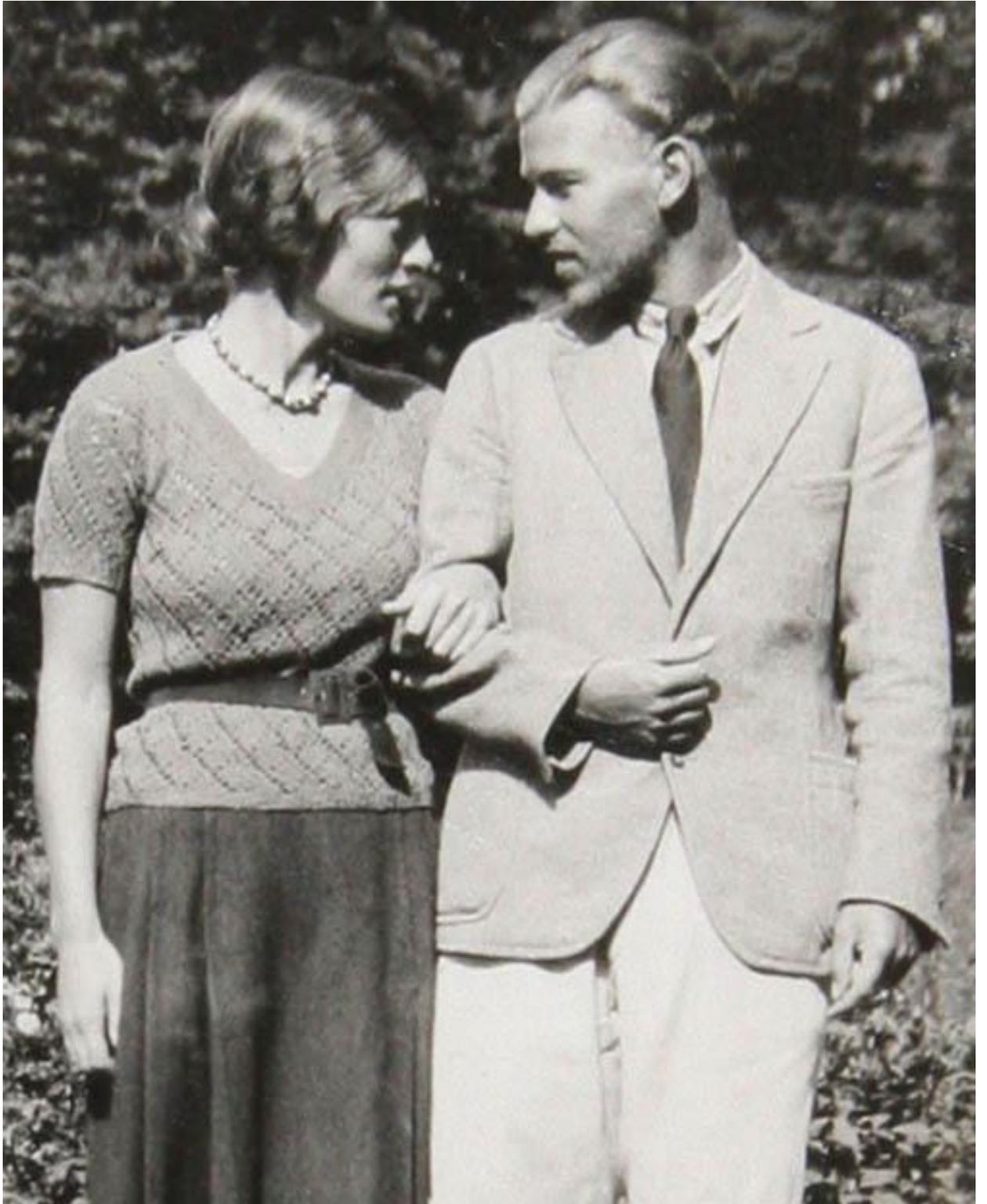
¹¹² Swansen, September 18, 2009.



Appendix A: Zimmermann Knitting (Courtesy of Meg Swansen and Schoolhouse Press)



Appendix B: Zimmermann in Dirndl (Courtesy of Meg Swansen and Schoolhouse Press)



Appendix C: Elizabeth and Arnold (Courtesy of Meg Swansen and Schoolhouse Press)

Straight Knitting

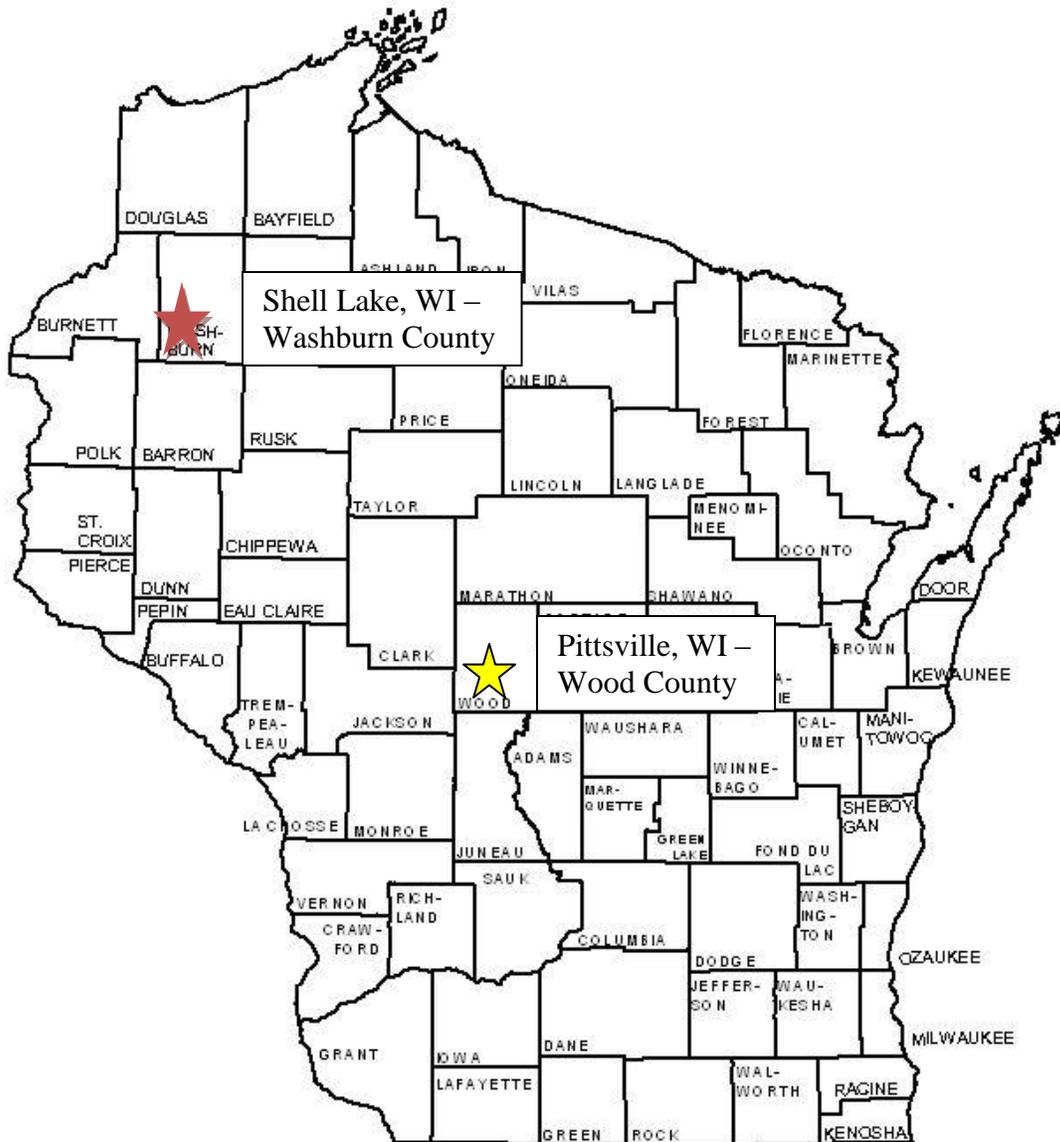


Circular Knitting



Appendix D (Author's example of a blanket square knitted on straight needles and an Aran sweater knitted on circular needles)

Outline Map of Wisconsin Counties



Wisconsin Demographic Services Center
November, 2000

Appendix E: Pittsville, WI and Shell Lake, WI locations (Courtesy of Geographical Data Links
<http://dpi.wi.gov/lbstat/countymap.html>)

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This book contains, as the title states, original Elizabeth Zimmermann knitting projects corresponding to every month of the year along with a description of how her inspiration to design them came about.

----- *Knitting Around*. Pittsville, Wisconsin: Schoolhouse Press, 1989.

A compilation of original Elizabeth Zimmermann patterns along with photographs from her life. These include photographs of her parents, Zimmermann throughout her life, pictures of her children and artwork done by Elizabeth Zimmermann. This book is also very autobiographical with information about her childhood, meeting her husband, his flee from Germany, and their life in the United States

----. *Knitting Without Tears*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971.

This book was the first that Elizabeth Zimmermann published and contains her opinions on using 100% sheepswool, EPS, and her "blind following" ideology.

----. *Knitting Workshop*. Pittsville, Wisconsin: Schoolhouse Press, 1981.

I did not cite this book in my paper but I have included in my bibliography because it is one of the books Zimmermann wrote and can be counted as a primary source.

----. *The Opinionated Knitter: Newsletters 1958-1968*. Pittsville, Wisconsin: Schoolhouse Press, 2005.

This book includes all of Zimmermann's newsletter between 1958 and 1968. Some of Zimmermann's journal entries were also included.

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Scrapbooks:

Zimmermann, Elizabeth. Scrapbooks. Private Collection.

Zimmermann's scrapbooks are filled with excerpts from fan letters, newspaper clippings and personal comments in the margins.

Newspaper/Magazine Articles:

New York Times. "E. Zimmermann is Dead at 89; Revolutionized Art of Knitting." Sunday, December 12, 1999.

<http://www.nytimes.com/1999/12/12/us/e-zimmermann-is-dead-at-89-revolutionized-art-of-knitting.html> (accessed December 7, 2009).

Scott, Shirley A. "Elizabeth Zimmermann: A Tribute to 50 Years of Inspiration," in *Vogue Knitting*.

http://www.vogueknitting.com/magazine/article_archive/elizabeth_zimmerman.aspx (accessed October 22, 2009).

Other Records:

U.S. Department of Commerce. *Statistical Abstract of the United States*. Washington, D. C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1955.

University Extension Records. Art Education. University of Wisconsin - Madison Archives. Madison, WI.

Wisconsin Designer Craftsmen, *Wisconsin Designer Craftsmen Records, 1937-1973*.

Secondary Sources:

Books:

Evans, Sara M. *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America*. New York: The Free Press A Division of Macmillan, Inc., 1989.

Gives a good history of Women in the U.S. including a section on Second Wave Feminism and the ways in which women protested domestic roles and patriarchal oppression. I have not cited this source in my paper, however it gave me good background on feminism in the United States.

Gordon, Beverly. *The Saturated World: Aesthetic Meaning, Intimate Objects, Women's Lives, 1890-1940*. Knoxville, Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, 2006.

This book looks at women's hobbies and how they have viewed in the past as trivial things with which women like to occupy themselves. In this book, Gordon argued that what has been seen as trivial hobbies due to women's oppression was more than that. These hobbies and

past times actually meant something to the women who did them and I use this argument in terms of knitting as well.

Humm, Maggie. ed. *Modern Feminisms: Political, Literary, Cultural*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.

Briefly lays out the history of Second Wave Feminism and contains essays that discuss feminist art/women's art. Again, this source also provides a good background into feminism and how different feminists feel about various aspects to the movement. Humm's book is not cited in the paper but it gives a good context to other feminist forms of expressions of the time.

Jensen, Joan M. *Calling This Place Home: Women on the Wisconsin Frontier 1850-1925*. St. Paul, Minnesota: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2006.

Although this book does not specifically talk about knitting it does give a good and thorough history of the settling of the area of Wisconsin I am concerned with and also focuses on the women who first settled in the central Wisconsin region. Jensen's book also sets a domestic context when she discussed how women provided for themselves and their families through sewing and keeping farms alive while their husbands were away mining or logging. She also discusses female friendships which relates to arguments in the paper.

Macdonald, Anne L. *No Idle Hands: The Social History of American Knitting*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1988.

The author analyzes American knitting from the colonial period through the 1970s and 80s while highlighting key knitting figures, including Elizabeth Zimmermann. Although this is not a true scholarly source, the author included a detailed bibliography. It is one of two general histories of hand knitting in the United States.

McBride, Genevieve G. *Women's Wisconsin: From Native Matriarchies to the New Millennium*. Madison, Wisconsin: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2005.

This book includes essays that discuss Wisconsin Women from American Indian women to women in the 1950s. The last chapter, dealing with Wisconsin Women since 1948, basically asks for more research and essays to be written about Wisconsin Women in the second half of the twentieth century which is one goal of my paper.

Rutt, Richard. *A History of Hand Knitting*. Loveland, Colorado: Interweave Press, 1987.

Rutt's book looks at the history of hand knitting on a broad scale in terms of where and when hand knitting is first believed to have been used. The main focus of the book, however, analyzes hand knitting in Europe and England and only spends several pages analyzing American hand knitting. As with other knitting histories used in the paper, Rutt's book contains a bibliography but it is not from an academic press.

Strawn, Susan M. *Knitting American: A Glorious Heritage from Warm Socks to High Art*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Voyager Press, 2007.

This book is similar to *No Idle Hands* because it looks at American knitting from the colonial era through the modern era. Slightly more scholarly written than MacDonald's book, *Knitting America* is a good non-scholarly yet carefully written and documented book that provides good background history for knitting in America.

Miscellaneous:

Boris, Eileen. "Homework and Women's Rights: The Case of Vermont Knitters, 1980-1985." *Signs* 13 (Autumn 1987): 98-120.

This text discusses the wish of some knitters to stay at home and raise their children while making money from their knitting and the debate that surrounded this issue. The context took place around the time that the knitting camp started, 1974, though not actually cited in the paper.

Medford, Kristina. "I Knit Therefore I Am: An Ethnomethodological of Knitting as Constitutive of Gendered Identity." PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 2006.

Analysis of knitting and gender with interviews from male knitters who work through performing a 'feminine hobby' while trying to remain masculine. It is not relevant to my topic and arguments and I have not cited it but it is a scholarly secondary source about knitting, which are hard to find.

Thakkar, Sonali. "The Knitting Lesson." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36 (Spring 2008): 174.

The author reflected on her mother passing down knitting, matriarchal knowledge, and how knitting meant something different for each of them. I did not use this source in my paper but the idea of traditional women's knowledge and mother-daughter connections through knitting is present in my arguments.