Piecing Together a Knitting Community: The Legacy of Elizabeth Zimmermann
Kathryn Parks and Colleen McFarland ♦ University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

Who Was Elizabeth Zimmermann (“EZ”)?
- Daughter of a wealthy British family, born in 1910
- Artist trained at the Kunstakademie in Munich, Germany (ca. 1930)
- Nanny for European nobility (ca. 1936)
- Wife of Arnold Zimmermann, a German brewmaster (1937)
- Political refugee and immigrant to the United States (1937)
- Mother of three children, Tom, Lloie, and Meg, born 1938, 1940, and 1942
- Wisconsinite who formally began her knitting career in Shorewood, a suburb of Milwaukee, and later moved to Pittsville, a small town near Wausau
- Entrepreneur who founded a mail order wool-only yarn business and self-published newsletters (1958-1989)
- TV Personality who brought The Busy Knitter to PBS stations nationwide (1964 - ca. 1980)
- “Opinionated Knitter” who continues to inspire knitters even after her death in 1999

“Knit on, with confidence and hope, through all crises.” (EZ, The Opinionated Knitter)

EZ: The Public Face of American Knitting
- Wisconsin Designer Craftsmen
  - Artists’ organization founded in 1916 to promote arts and crafts in Wisconsin
  - EZ was a member ca. 1960-1970
  - Only knitter in the WDC membership at that time
  - Award winner in 1960 for knitted wool sweater
- The Busy Knitter on PBS
  - Originated in Milwaukee – approached by Beulah Donahue, who invited EZ to appear on her morning TV show
  - After EZ appeared on Donahue’s show, she approached the television station about her own knitting show
  - 10 part program teaching how to make a sweater
  - Syndicated nationally through the early 1980s
- Knitting Camp
  - Began in 1974 at UW-Extension, Shell Lake
  - First knitting retreat offered in the U.S.
  - One one-week session gradually expanded to four one-week sessions
  - 2009 marked the camp’s 36th year
- Publications
  - Knitting Without Tears, 1971
  - Knitter’s Almanac, 1974
  - Knitting Workshop, 1981
  - Knitting Around, 1989
  - The Opinionated Knitter, 2005 (posthumous)

“Between those lines of wisdom ... is a whole philosophy of living which is equally inspiring. A joy of living, learning, sharing and wonder.” (ca. 1982 fan letter)

Knitting Meets Feminism
- Knitting Outside of the Home
  - As a knitting mentor and instructor, EZ brought knitting into the public sphere through mass media and unconventional knitting venues
  - EZ helped knitters overcome social isolation by providing “safe” physical and emotional spaces and inviting women into friendship

“I feel as though I am a friend, even though you don’t know me.” (ca. 1981 fan letter)
- Rejecting the Phallus
  - EZ embraced and promoted circular knitting over flat knitting with straight needles
  - Circular knitting allows the knitter the flexibility to modify patterns and create seamless garments
- Building Women’s Confidence
  - Urged women not to “blindly follow” patterns, but to have confidence to design for their own bodies and styles
  - EZ’s philosophy “There’s not a wrong way; it’s your way”

“I had so much more freedom. [EZ’s philosophy] gave me a different push in terms of my life that I hadn’t had before.” (Deb Olson, Knitting Camper, 2009)

Research Methods
- Oral history interviews with knitting campers
- Archival Research
  - EZ Scrapbooks held by the Swansen Family
  - Wisconsin Designer Craftsmen Records and Publications at the Milwaukee Art Museum, the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, and the UW – Milwaukee Special Collections
  - Instructional and autobiographical publications