

A Stitch in Time



So how did a small hand sewing machine arrive on Chatham Island shores? The hand sewing machine's overseas history came to light after much deciphering of an oval trademark on the footplate of the machine. The incised name was Hugo Wertheim, Melbourne.

Hugo Wertheim (1854-1919), was a relative of a wealthy, well established German business man, Joseph Wertheim, manufacturer of hand and treadle sewing machines likely copied under license from America. Hugo, born at Lispenhausen in central Germany, travelled extensively before emigrating to Australia, possibly in the late 1860s.

Initially, Hugo advertised sewing machines from premises at 39 Flinders Lane East, Melbourne, as an agent for Joseph Wertheim, but in the early 1870s he founded his own firm at 173 William Street, Melbourne and extended his sales to outlets in Adelaide and Wellington. Hugo returned often to Europe for new designs and other innovations. In early 1882 he became a naturalized Australian and in 1885 married Joseph Wertheim's daughter Sophie Emilie at Frankfurt; they returned to Melbourne in the *Great Britain* in October 1885.

The photo shows possibly a Wertheim Model A, complete with needle and two reels of thread. A basic coat of 'japaning', a mixture of turpentine and gum asphaltum had been baked onto the cast iron frame for protection. Such machines were a boon to

the early pioneer women who had to make much of their own clothing, mend or re-make garments.

The traditional early sewing machine stitch, a basic chain stitch which looped back on itself was made by pushing the needle down through the material by the turn of the handle. As the needle rose the rubbing of the thread was enough to create a small loop underneath the fabric. The machine moved the material forward extending the small loop underneath. The next fall of the needle passed through the previous loop. A mechanical foot plate mechanism set free the first loop and picked up the new loop. This mechanical operation repeated itself. The fact that two or three pieces of material could be sewn together with chain stitch appealed to busy women.

On Chatham Islands, Edwards Chudleigh, an early run holder and diarist of Wharekauri Station recorded that on November 22, 1884 his wife Mabel 'has made me a pair of trousers as good as any of my London ones and 12 shirts all much better than my Poole and Lord shirts though copied from them, also a blouse or smocked frock to shear in.' Also on May 2, 1890 Chudleigh notes that Mabel 'showed Mrs Wishart how to work a sewing machine.'

