

### Aprons from the hand-me-down box



By Mary Cook

January was barely over when Mother would decide it was time to get caught up on the sewing. Much of the hand-me-down box which came twice a year had been sorted and what was left to be made over was in a pillow-case behind Mother and Father's bedroom door. My brothers were already wearing shirts that had their collars and cuffs turned, and suit pants had been made into jumpers and skirts for Audrey and me.

That year, for some reason or other, Aunt Lizzie had put into the hand-me-down box a good piece of Dan River cotton. Mother was thrilled because it sold for 49 cents a yard at Walker's Store in Renfrew, and completely out of reach as far as Mother was concerned. Especially after the added expense of Christmas just behind her.

"Not enough here to make a house dress," she said, holding the piece of mauve and blue plaid cotton up to her shoulder. "I guess it will just have to be made into aprons." The drawer of the back-to-the-wall cupboard was stuffed full of aprons, but they were mostly white, made out of bleached flour bags, and much bigger than any of our other aprons. We called these big white aprons: pinnys. Audrey and I wore them if we were helping Mother bake, or doing chores that just might soil what we were already wearing. They were not the least bit fancy, just plain and practical, and on me they came almost to my ankles.

Also in the drawer were a few what Mother called "dress aprons." These were put on very quickly if someone came to the house unexpectedly and Mother was caught with an apron on that showed even a hint of being soiled. The change took place in a jiffy, making Mother presentable to welcome whoever came to the door.

And so the piece of Dan River cotton which came from Aunt Lizzie was to be made into these dress aprons. Using an old one as a pattern, Mother was able to get two out of the piece, which pleased her greatly. Audrey was sent to the sewing box to see if there was any bias binding to finish the aprons properly. To buy new binding would be foolhardy, since it cost 7 cents a package. "We'll just use whatever is there," Mother said. And that's how it turned out that the blue and

mauve aprons had bright red binding all around the aprons' edge.

Audrey thought it looked terrible. I thought it was lovely.

Aprons back then served us well. Of course, the main purpose was to keep whatever else we were wearing clean.

Mother often used the apron as a pot-holder, scrunching it up to lift something off the stove. And she had a way of wrapping her hand in the bottom half to wipe off a piece of furniture as she was walking past it. And of course, if there wasn't a towel handy, the bottom of the apron would do just fine.

The apron was great for carrying eggs from the hen house too. You just scrunched up the bottom making a tote affair, and the eggs were carried safely into the house. When I first tried this, after watching Mother and Audrey do it with ease, I dropped a corner of the apron, and most of the eggs fell onto the floor of the hen house. I confess now, so many years later, that I told a bare-faced lie and said there weren't many eggs that day, when the truth of the matter was I was able to clean up the mess by scattering sand from the dirt floor over the broken eggs. From then on, until I mastered the feat of carrying eggs in the bottom of my apron, I relied on the wicker basket from the summer kitchen.

If Mother had to go to the door in the winter for just a few seconds, she would pull the tail of the apron up and wrap her arms in it to ward off the cold, which was just another purpose the apron served.

Aprons would be well worn before they would be moved on to the rag bag which hung behind the kitchen door. But long before this, I would see Mother take an old apron and cut it into many identically sized squares, make cross-ward stitching with the Singer sewing machine, bind the edges if there were bits and pieces left over from a previous use, and we would have pot holders.

Aprons in our house back then were made into several sizes. Mine were smaller, dress aprons were more dainty, and then there were the every day aprons, which covered Mother and Audrey amply. Like the coal oil lamps, the cook stove, or the handmade braided rugs which covered our floors in the winter, the apron was very much a symbol of the times.

*This article originally appeared in the February 2010 issue of Forever Young Newspaper.*