

GRANDMA'S *Ragbags*

They contained magical potential.

By Kim Hinson

“**T**here you go!” said Grandma, dumping the garbage bag full of used clothes onto the twin bed in her sewing room. “Pick something you like, and then Grandpa and I will make the rest into rag rugs on the loom.”

Grandma always seemed to have a bag of used clothes sitting around her sewing room, and when I was a 6-year-old in 1964, it was always a happy day for me when Grandma let me pick something “new” to add to my coat-of-many-colors wardrobe.

Grandma and Grandpa supplemented their Social Security income by making and selling homemade rag rugs and birdhouses, and by renting out the three extra bedrooms in their big, old foursquare house to nurses who worked two blocks away at St. Mary’s Hospital in Rochester, Minn. Random nurses and friends from around Grandma’s neighborhood often dropped off garbage bags of cast-off clothes, and Grandma and Grandpa drove around town in search of leftover clothing from church and neighborhood rummage sales and from secondhand-store dumpsters.

I pursed my lips, tilted my head and scrutinized flashy paisley blouses, plain white and silky brown shirts, old denim jeans and nylon pants with businesslike but wrinkled creases down the front. Plucking out a burnt orange, boyish-looking shirt with two breast pockets and a couple of missing buttons, I said, “I like this one—it looks kind of like a cowgirl shirt.”

Grandma held it up and said, “Put it on, and I’ll pin it up and take it in so it’ll fit a little better.”

Grandma pinned the sides, giving it a more girly look, and then took my new-old orange shirt over to one of the three sewing machines she kept all set up and ready to sew, each threaded and bobbed with a different color of thread, and each



Kim’s grandma (on the right) shares a laugh with a friend.

with different tension and stitching adjustments for a variety of fabrics: thick, tough denim; silky, stretchy nylon; or just plain cotton.

“See if you can find thread to match,” said Grandma, helping me take off the shirt and gesturing toward the dark-stained-plywood thread cabinet Grandpa had made for her. Holding my new shirt up to spool after spool of thread of every possible color, each stuck on its own peg or nail in the cabinet, I noticed a few spools filled with frayed, zigzaggy thread that had Grandma’s thrifty handiwork written all over them. I’d often seen her pull long, continuous but rickety lengths of string from the hems of old clothes. She wrapped it around empty spools, saying, “There’s nothing wrong with this thread.”

Grandma herself dressed in clothes she found in the garbage bags, taking in or letting out waistbands

and sleeves, shortening or lengthening hems, and sometimes adding a bit of fabric from her ragbag if the pants or dresses were still too short. She was 6 feet tall, with extra-long arms and a halo of white, fluffy hair. Grandma's fashion statement always whispered, "*Comfortable.*"

Short, bald and portly Grandpa wore the same outfit every day: a white button-down dress shirt and brown linen pants held up with clip-on suspenders. Grandma had yanked the elastic right out of the pants waistband to make them comfy.

In the evenings before bed, Grandpa drifted around in a voluminous striped nightshirt that Grandma had sewn up from who knows how many normal-size secondhand shirts.

I thanked Grandma for fixing my new shirt, and then she said, "Why don't you pick out some more of those clothes and I'll make a rag rug for you to put in your bedroom." This surprised me because Grandma and Grandpa needed the money, so they didn't give their rugs away, even to a precious granddaughter, except on special occasions.

"Thank you, Grandma!" I said, turning back to the pile of clothes. I picked out every pinkish garment I could find. Then Grandma used a seam ripper to take out all the zippers, and she snipped off every button, snap, and hook and eye with little silver cuticle scissors. She put the zippers in metal soda-cracker boxes, the buttons in round cookie tins, and the snaps and hooks and eyes in separate metal Band-Aid boxes. She organized her motley storage containers on a wooden shelf Grandpa had built for her in the closet.

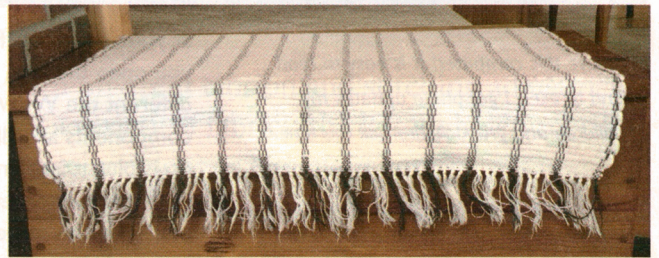
We carried the shades-of-pink pile of zipperless, buttonless and snapless used clothes downstairs to Grandpa, who spent his days making birdhouses in the basement and cutting old clothes into strips on the living room couch. Luck was with us because Grandpa was dressed in his daytime clothes and already sitting at the couch, a pair of huge silver shears in hand, cutting, cutting, cutting piles of old clothes into long strips, letting them stream to the floor in a colorful fabric mountain.

"Cut these next, Dad," Grandma said. She still called Grandpa "Dad" even though their two

twin girls, one of them my mother, had long ago grown up and moved out. "I'm going to make a rug for Kim."

Grandpa did the cutting, and then Grandma wound the light, medium and dark pink fabric strips onto loom shuttles. We carried them down to the cellar where an ancient, two-treadle rug loom from Sears, Roebuck sat in a filtered ray of sunlight cast through a single dusty hopper window. The cloth beam held most of a finished denim-color rug, so Grandma turned the ratchet wheel a few times to wind up the rest of the rug, leaving a foot or more of empty threads between the finished rug and my new one.

After weaving a tight inch or so of thick, white warp thread for a border, Grandma picked up a pink-fabric-filled shuttle and shot it through the "shed"—the tent of threads on the loom—then slammed the beater to press the fabric tight, shifted the treadles to move the warp threads, and then shot the shuttle through the newly created shed from the opposite side, slammed the beater, shifted the treadles, and on and on. Grandma almost had that old loom smoking to finish my rug before darkness shadowed the hopper window.



Kim still has the rag rug her grandma made.

I used that rag rug all through elementary and high school, and I brought it with me to college to make my dorm room feel more like home. And even now, 50 years and more than 17 moves later, I decorate my Vermont log home with Grandma's special rag rug gift.

Grandma didn't give things that cost real money. But as I remember Grandma's generosity and the love she put into weaving my pink rug, that old rag rug is as priceless to me now as any expensive heirloom. ♦