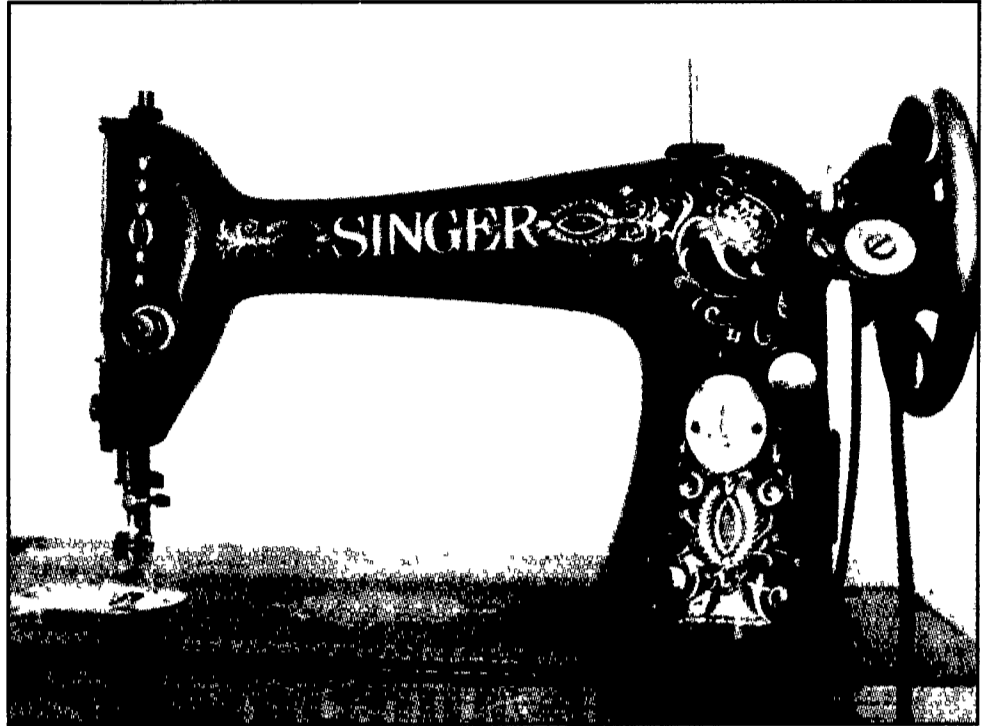


Lancaster Farming *Antiques Center*

Sewing Machines Find Second Life Under His Hands



Joe Russell has refinished countless sewing machine cabinets during his 15-20 years of work.



Russell's Amish customers replace old sewing machines such as this one with a newer model that works with the treadle and does not need electricity.

MICHELLE KUNJAPPU Sections Staff

LITITZ (Lancaster Co.)— Because of Joe Russell's efforts, countless sewing machines have made a comeback and are now busily working under the hands of his Amish and Mennonite customers.

Russell has refinished sewing machine cabinets for 15-20 years, giving shine to the wood and enabling rusty metal parts to work once again. Members of Amish and Mennonite communities seek out the sewing machines since

the treadles work the machine without electricity.

Russell refinishes the machine so that the old "heads" can be taken out and fitted with newer sewing machines.

Since refinishing the cabinets is a specialty skill performed by few other woodworkers, Russell's work is certainly in demand, however he began the business almost by accident.

"I always did wood work all my life, as a hobby," said Russell, who built most of the couple's

furniture after he and his wife, Evelyn, were married.

"Fifteen or 20 years ago an Amish lady who knew I did woodwork brought me a busted up treadle, and that's what got me in the treadle business. I've been in that ever since," he said.

His refinished cabinets have also gone to customers in Ohio, Indiana, Wisconsin, California, and as far away as Saudi Arabia.

Most of the cabinets were made in the years between 1915-1920. The machines and cabinets, though old, are not hard to find.

"I have little or no trouble getting them, since people will buy them and then call and sell them to me," he said.

Word-of-mouth advertising also sells the machines. The "treadles" go for \$150-\$400, depending on if the cabinet is plain or ornate, and if it has five or seven drawers. Simply refinishing the cabinet costs \$125 for a five-drawer unit.

The refinishing process begins from the ground up.

"I tear it all apart. Every screw, nut, and bolt comes out," he said. Once the cabinet is deconstructed, Russell replaces worn or rotting pieces of wood by making new. Next he strips off the old veneer and replaces it with new veneer, which he stains a medium oak color, since approximately 75 percent of treadle sewing machines are made of oak.

The metal pieces are first sand blasted. "A lot of these machines are left down in a cellar or out in a barn and they're all rusted," said Evelyn. "The wheels don't even turn."

Russell then paints the metal black except for the gold paint which highlights the familiar word "Singer" on the metal work.

The last step of the process is to spray on a coat of lacquer.

Russell estimates that if he worked eight-hour days that he could get a cabinet done in 2½ to three days. However, since he has retired, he is relaxed about putting in hours at the shop, preferring to balance his time with his wife and working at the antique co-op that he and his wife are a part of. The nearby workshop is a refinished barn on his son's farm.

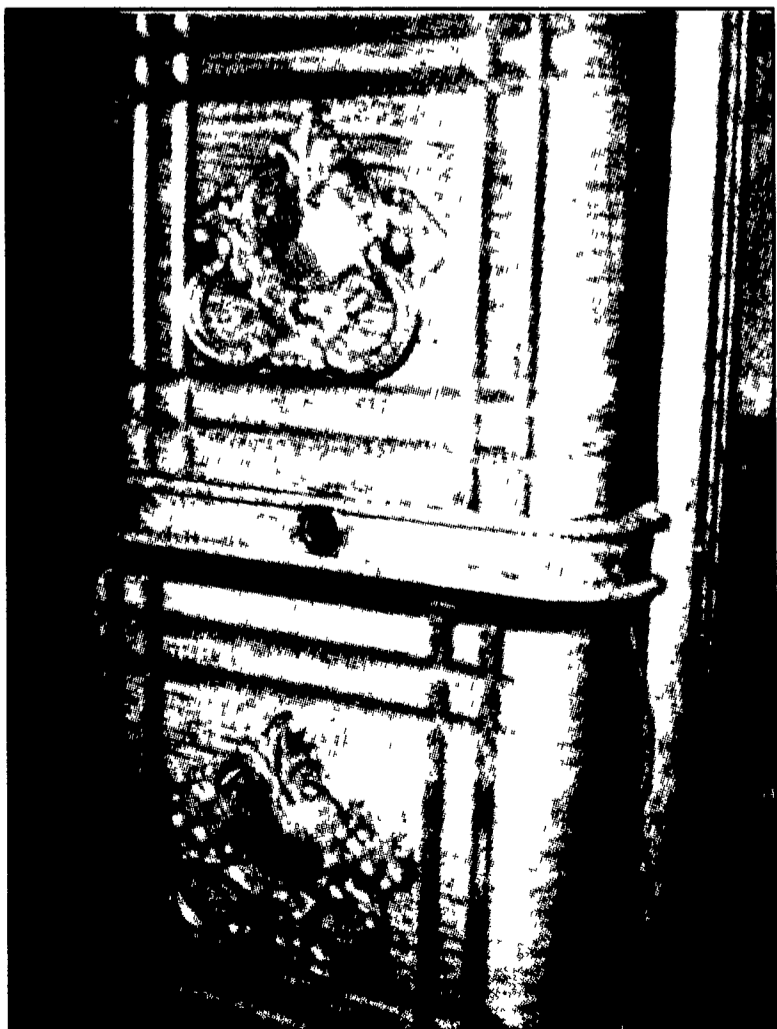
The work, however, has paid off, since with treadle money he purchased a 1930 Model A Ford, which he enjoys taking out on the road 2-3 times per week.

Russell grew up in Dunellen,

New Jersey, then moved to Pennsylvania to allow his son Joseph the opportunity to farm. After Joseph operated a cattle feedlot for a few years, the family moved to Mount Joy to operate a dairy farm. While his son took care of the animals, Russell worked in industrial air conditioning and taught vo-tech in two different schools.

Evelyn is a member of Society 8 of Farm Women.

Besides word-of-mouth, Russell also markets the sewing machines at the Antique Marketplace in Soudersburg.



These brass pulls are original. Most of the cabinets that he finishes were built in the years between 1915-1920.



After sandblasting the metal parts to remove rust, Russell gives them a fresh coat of black paint.