



The Princess Lace Machine *or* Loom

NEITHER MACHINE NOR LOOM

KAREN H. THOMPSON

ABOVE LEFT: The
Torchon Lace
Company Princess
Lace Machine.
Circa 1904.

Collection of the
National Museum
of American History,
Smithsonian Institu-
tion. (T13952).

*Photograph courtesy of
the National Museum
of American History,
Smithsonian Institu-
tion, Washington, D.C.*

ABOVE RIGHT:
Detail of bobbin
lace made by the
author on a
Princess Lace
Machine. Linen.
Illinois. 2006.

*Photograph courtesy of
the author.*

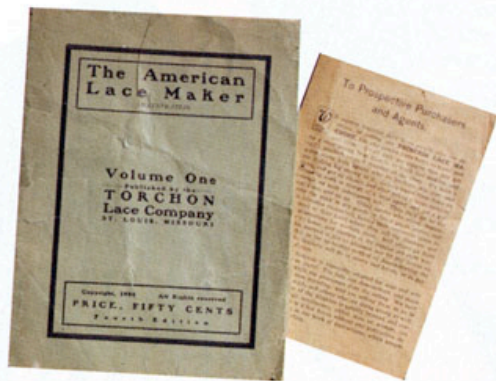
THE PRINCESS LACE MACHINE or Loom burst on the American scene in 1903, the brainchild of New Jersey-born businessman Sylvester G. Lewis.

The curiously named tool is actually neither a machine nor a loom but a cylindrical pillow for making bobbin lace fitted with a roller for taking up the finished lace. Although Lewis's inspiration was attributed to having seen a Swedish woman making bobbin lace in a Chicago museum, his product closely resembles a bobbin-lace pillow shown in an 1884 German guide to making bobbin lace.

The bobbin-lace patterns (prickings) that came with the machine, printed on flimsy tan card stock, were 11¼ inches (29.8 cm) long to fit around the roller on the lace machine. The tiny numbers by the pinholes on the

prickings correspond to numbers in an accompanying instruction book that indicate what action the lace maker should take at each pin.

Lace making came to America with the arrival of lace-maker immigrants from all over the world. A number of lace-making industries were started, including one founded in Ipswich, Massachusetts, in the eighteenth century. The Princess Lace Machine was a product of The Torchon Lace Company (torchon is a geometric, relatively simple-to-make type of bobbin lace) of St. Louis, founded in Chicago as The Torchon Co-operative Lace Company in 1901 and becoming The Torchon Lace and Mercantile Company in 1906. Sylvester Lewis, born in 1868, was variously treasurer, manager, secretary, president, or director of the company



The Torchon Lace Company booklet *The American Lace Maker* (Illustrated), Volume One, which contains general instructions for making bobbin lace and specific instructions for making each pattern, and one of the company's sales brochures. 1904. Collection of the author.

Photograph by Joe Coca.

until he left in 1913 to establish a real estate and building company in St. Louis.

Lewis sold the lace machines by mail order through advertisements in women's magazines such as *The Delineator*, *The Modern Priscilla*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *McCall's Magazine*. A full-page advertisement in the November 1905 *Harper's Bazar* claims, "Upwards of 25,000 of these machines have already been sold"; an ad in the July 1906 *Modern Priscilla* states, "Over 25,000 already sold."

Although, according to his promotional booklet *Practical Lace Making (Illustrated)* (n.d.), Lewis's "book of instructions" "was designed for the purpose of teaching the operation of the Loom by mail" and "so simplifies the art that any person of ordinary intelligence can master every detail of the work with very little practice," its patterns and instructions actually were lifted freely from several previously published books on bobbin lace, including Sara Rasmussen's *Klöppelbuch* [Book of Bobbin Lace], published in German and Danish (*Kniplebog*) in 1884. In fact, the history of lace in Lewis's booklet is a direct translation (with a few minor mistakes) from Rasmussen's book; her book offers no step-by-step directions for the later, more complex patterns, only a picture of the finished lace and the pricking without the little numbers, but that is because she assumed that the lace maker, by this time, was so advanced as to no longer need detailed instructions. The Torchon Lace Company simply added the numbers and the dot-to-dot instructions to these patterns of Rasmussen's.

Lewis claimed that his machine could provide

a very profitable occupation [for] the ladies of America . . . [who,] after they have acquired a little practice at the work, can make a nice income at it,



and it is a very pleasant and dainty occupation for any refined woman. . . . [I]t is not hard on the eyes. Ladies with the weakest eyes can work at it with impunity, continuously, from day to day. . . . In fact, our system of instruction is so complete and perfect, that any person, no matter what their previous avocation has been, can easily master every detail of it with very little practice.

Not only was the technique easy to learn,

[the company] agrees to purchase . . . all finished laces sent to it that are made equal to samples sent with said Princess Lace Loom [as w]e have an unlimited market for all the lace we can get, and with the liberal prices we pay, you can soon earn a

Prickings for patterns that correspond to the instructions and pictures in The Torchon Lace Company booklet *The American Lace Maker (Illustrated)*, Volume One, and bobbins from The Torchon Lace Company. 1904. Collection of the author. Photograph by Joe Coca.

Detail of a Princess Lace Machine showing the pricking and lace. The blue felt wound around the roller under the pricking ensures that the pricking will fit: each pattern repeat is $\frac{3}{8}$ inch (1.6 cm) long; to make a continuous piece of lace, the circumference of the roller must be a multiple of $\frac{3}{8}$ inch (1.6 cm). The length of the pattern repeat differs for each pattern, but in order to fit around the roller in a continuous loop, a multiple of the repeat for each pattern must be close to the circumference of the roller. The patterns are printed on long strips of paper to allow for some overlap of the unprinted ends when pinning to the roller. One end must be bent back to the exact beginning, or end, of the pattern as the beginning row of the first pattern repeat must fit exactly with the end row of the last pattern repeat.

Photograph courtesy of the author.



The author using a Princess Lace Machine to make bobbin lace.
Photograph courtesy of the author.

nice income at the work. . . . You need have no fear of the market ever becoming overstocked, as there is fifteen millions of dollars worth of lace consumed in this county [sic] every year; all of which has formerly been imported from Europe . . . and there is no reason why the women of America should not make what is consumed in this country, especially as they have the advantage of a duty of 60 cents on every dollar's worth of lace imported into this country, to say nothing of freights and brokerage, dealers' profits, etc.

The owner of a machine might earn money in other ways than by making lace and selling it to the company. An undated sales brochure for the machine titled "To Prospective Purchasers and Agents" states:

The Princess Lace Machine has been upon the market now nearly four years, and it has proven itself the fastest seller ever offered to agents, and our sales are simply phenomenal, and are increasing by leaps and bounds. . . . If you are looking for an opportunity to make money, either lady or gentlemen [sic]; if you live at home, or

wish to travel, our Princess Lace Machine offers you an opportunity seldom equaled. . . . The operation of the Machine is quickly learned, and anyone of average intelligence, either man or woman, can learn to use it in a few hours without any instruction, except that given in our book of instructions, which accompanies each Machine.

Lewis's intention was that a customer would buy a lace machine, quickly learn to "operate" it, and then offer classes in its use, selling a machine to each student. Setting up in a dry-goods or fancy-goods store or going door to door were suggested as ways of selling the machines.

A 1907 letter from The Torchon Lace and Mercantile Company (shown on page 45) offers a prospective buyer from Wisconsin "a commission of \$1.50 on each \$5.00 order you secure." (Each machine sold for \$5.00; instruction booklets sold for 50 cents each, but agents could buy them for 25 cents.) A lace sample card from the



The author's reconstruction, made on a Princess Lace Machine, of Lesson 17, "Spider Lace," from The Torchon Lace Company booklet *The American Lace Maker (Illustrated)*, Volume One, and polished and unpolished bobbins from The Torchon Lace Company. Bobbin lace; linen thread, Illinois, 2006. Bobbins; wood, circa 1904, collection of the author.
Photograph by Joe Coca.

company lists laces for sale for 12, 15, and 20 cents per yard (.9 m) according to the width of the lace.

In 1906, The Torchon Lace Company offered the “opportunity” to buy stock for \$10 per share in the new “Torchon Lace & Mercantile Co.” The same year, the company published *The Art of Lace Making (Illustrated)*, a booklet with substantially the same content as that of *Practical Lace Making (Illustrated)* (n.d.) but having fancier paper and printing and ten new pictures of large Cluny-style laces (few of which could possibly be made on the Princess Lace Machine). Photographs of the officers and some of the departments and workrooms also were included in the 1906 publication.

Sylvester Lewis created a fascinating enterprise around his Princess Lace Machine, touted as a great improvement over the lace-making equipment then available in Europe. True or not true, the company remained in business until 1919. If you have information on or questions about The Torchon Lace Company, I would like to hear from you. Please e-mail me at karenhthompson@att.net. ❖

ABOUT THE AUTHOR. *Karen H. Thompson has been making, studying, and teaching lace for the past thirty years. A volunteer at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., she conducts monthly behind-the-scenes tours of the lace collection (the tours have been suspended while the museum undergoes renovations). At the Spurlock Museum in Urbana, Illinois, she is the curator for the upcoming exhibition (March 27 through August 26) Why Knot?, where the Princess Lace Machine from her collection will be on display. She thanks Doris Bowman, Sheryl DeJong, Mary Lou Kueker, Elizabeth Kurella, and Diana Lillevig for their help with her research.*

For More Information

- A copy of the patent for the “Lace Machine” may be viewed at www.cs.arizona.edu/patterns/weaving/patents/00745206.pdf
- Monographs of The Torchon Lace Company's pattern books, *The American Lace Maker (Illustrated)*, Volumes 1 and 2, are available at <http://www.handweaving.net/DAList.aspx?Type=Pub&PubID=961>
- Sara Rasmussen's *Klöppelbuch* (1884) is available in PDF format at www.cs.arizona.edu/patterns/weaving/books/rs_lace.pdf

—K. H. T.

FURTHER READING

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Earnshaw, Pat. *Lace in Fashion from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Centuries*. Sharnley Green, Guildford, England: Gorse, 1991.

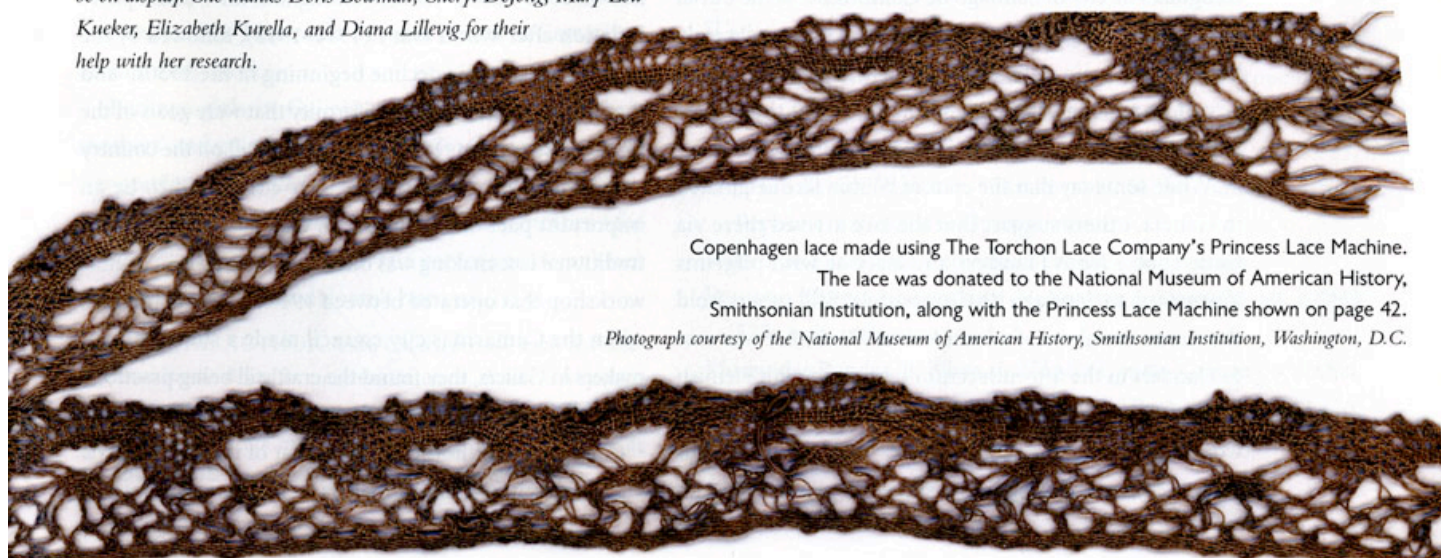
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Letters to a potential agent from The Torchon Lace and Mercantile Company. 1907. Collection of the author. Photograph by Joe Coca.



Copenhagen lace made using The Torchon Lace Company's Princess Lace Machine.

The lace was donated to the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, along with the Princess Lace Machine shown on page 42.

Photograph courtesy of the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.