

Hello to all of members and friends of the Nisswa Women's Club —

It's September, 2020, and it is time to Celebrate the Centennial of the Nisswa Women's Club! My name is Lilja Behr. I was invited to offer you this greeting on line because, due to the coronavirus, you can't gather to observe this milestone.



Yes, I know. This is hardly a substitute for a gala luncheon at a beautiful restaurant! I ask you to accept this greeting for what it is: a simple attempt to honor some astonishing women who began the Nisswa Women's Club 100 years ago when, remarkably, they were experiencing some of the same challenges we are living with right now.

100 years ago, in the midst of much uncertainty, 14 women decided to do something thoughtful and kind and life affirming. Their club started so small. It could have been abandoned so many times along the way.

But here we are: celebrating 100 years of women who are still working together: women who are curious, women who care, and women who choose to contribute to the community they love. That's you!

I ask you to consider this an end-of-summer letter . . . sort of a "How I Spent my Summer Vacation" musing that I send to you. How did I spend my summer? First, I took a trip through the printed archives of the Nisswa Women's Club. Then, I thought a lot about 100 years of SISTERHOOD, starting with those plucky women of The Nisswa Sewing Club and The Nisswa Busy Bees. Finally, I wondered about what the future might bring for the Nisswa Women's Club. From a small start 100 years ago, you've inherited quite a gift! How will you share the care, the creativity, and the contributions of this club in the years to come?



OK. I'll admit it. In person, I've only been a guest at one actual meeting of the Nisswa Women's Club. But, stay with me here. Please be patient as I scribble away on this imaginary letter to you. And then, if you will, accept my audacious attempt to honor the Nisswa Women's Club's at its august age of 100 years. Yes, I'm offering you my perspective as a visitor, an observer, and even an admirer. And, perhaps when I'm done, you'll go on Zoom and add your own perspective and remembrance to the celebration.

You've got to know that some of your sisters put me up to this. Jane Gunsbury and Mary Anne Bennett invited me first, and along the way I met Suzanne Sundquist and Karen DeVries. I enjoyed brief visits with each of those dear women, and in their own ways, they handed me souvenirs and some great travel brochures — well actually, bits and pieces of their take on the Nisswa Women's Club.

Then, they did a crazy thing . . . or, maybe it wasn't so crazy after all. For after sharing their bits and bobs, clips and trims, smidgens and remnants of 100 years of the Nisswa Women's Club, they handed me a challenge. "Tell us what patterns you see in the snippets of our story."



Did you catch my references to quilting patterns? Did you notice my fondness for words such as "bits and bobs" and "smidgens and remnants"? I hope so, because thanks to the inspiration of your own quilter-par-excellence and your president-elect, Karen DeVries, my perception of the Nisswa Women's Club settled quite nicely upon an imaginary pile of lovely quilts that might have been tucked away in a 100-year old trunk.

Now, I'm just a novice quilter, but when I started to lay out some of your club's early quilts (*whisper: of your history*), their patterns became delightfully clear to me. Whether the blocks were snipped from some 100 year-old cotton that had been recycled from a beloved dress or they were chosen from some feed sack prints, the quilts I found in the Nisswa Women's Club's history trunk were colorful, multi-faceted, carefully stitched, and finely bound. I learned that they had been generously

wrapped around people in the wider community who were in need. And oh, they were warm and wonderful!

As writer, Linzee Kull McCray once wrote in her book, Feed Sacks, “I stand in awe of women who cooked, cleaned, gardened, canned and raised numerous children (and quite likely, plenty of chickens), and still managed to add rickrack or embroidery to their aprons and dishtowels, [and then] saved scraps until they had enough to make the quilts for others. . . [Their] resourcefulness, resilience and domestic skills sustained and enriched their families — and whole communities.”



**“Cut with hope, stitched with grace,
quilted with dreams,
bound with laughter,
and shared with love.”**

Let’s go back to the 1920’s. In Nisswa there were a few simple store fronts located on a sand and gravel street. And, parked by the stores you could probably see some wagons with horses and a few Model T’s, too. The first Model T’s came off the production line in 1908.

Historian Carl Zapffe wrote that one of the earliest cars to be



seen in the Nisswa area was a Ford owned by William Murray. But it was still hard to get around. Of course, there was no Highway 371, Zapffe noted. “For William Murray to get from Nisswa to Brainerd he had to drive the old Leech Lake ox-cart trail in sand deeper than the hubs of his wheels, twisting and turning around stumps and logs left by the logging operations . . . He had to more or less follow the route of least resistance.” And then Zapffe added, “Roads into this region were improved slightly by 1916, and the speed limit in town was 6 miles per hour!” I’m going to remember that when I’m running late for an appointment!

When I think of the frustrations and cancellations and social distancing we have experienced since the onset of the coronavirus last March, I marvel at those Busy Bees who gathered during the 1920’s.

Do you remember the line, “a penny saved is a penny earned?” The Busy Bees loved that adage, too. The phrase indicated that it was crucial to SAVE one’s money — every penny saved was protection for hard times.

But that penny was still valuable in 1920. You could buy a pound of round steak for 27 cents, a pound of cheese for 44 cents, a pound of potatoes for 4 cents, and a pound of Navy beans for 13 cents. A spool of thread, a plain thimble, or a yard of ribbon each cost 5 cents.



Instead of saving up their pennies for a pound of coffee that cost a Busy Bee about 59 cents, the Busy Bees urged their members to tuck away a few pennies for another’s good. I’m sure you remember the story. They sewed small drawstring pouches for every member, and with the pouch they included a sweet little poem that read,

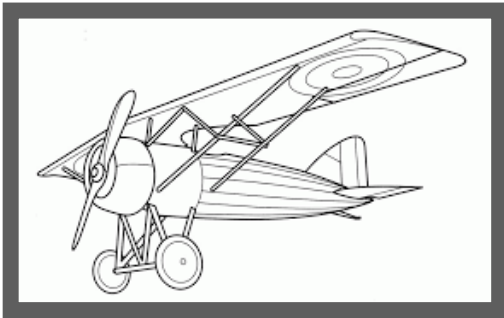
“For every rainy day, drop a penny in please.

The money goes to the Nisswa Busy Bees.”

Those Nisswa Busy Bees had their share of rainy days. I wonder how they summoned the desire or extra energy — let alone the creativity — to sew for others when they endured so many difficulties themselves? Consider just a few of the challenges they faced.

In November of 1918, as **World War I** was ending, a **deadly virus** — one with no known cure — was erupting in Europe. And yes, just as our pandemic was misnamed in 2020, a hundred years ago the virus was also mistakenly called the “Spanish Flu.” When US troops came home from Europe, they brought the virus with them. By the end of 1918, 7,260 people had died in Minnesota alone from the pandemic. Blessedly, the virus was over by 1920, but again, I wonder: of the 14 women who started The Nisswa Sewing Club in 1920, how many were grieving the loss of a loved one due to war or the pandemic or both? And there were even more challenges on the horizon.

But first, some good news.



There was amazing news. A friend of mine said, “Don’t forget to talk about Amelia Earhart. My mom was born in 1920 and Earhart was an inspiration to her as she flew across the Atlantic alone in 1932.” But I had to tell my friend that women were making the world sit up and cheer even before 1920!

Did you know that in September of 1910, Bessica Raiche made a solo flight in a Wright brothers-type plane of bamboo and silk? She and her husband built the plane in their living room! Bessica became known as America’s first woman aviator, but she became even better-known in the field of medicine as America’s first female specialist in obstetrics and gynecology.

Then, in 1911, American journalist Harriet Quimby earned her pilot’s license and she became the first woman to fly across the English Channel in 1912.

And in 1921, Bessie Coleman, who was known as “Brave Bessie,” was the first African American woman to earn her pilot’s license. But, Bessie had to get her license in France because no American flight schools would accept her.

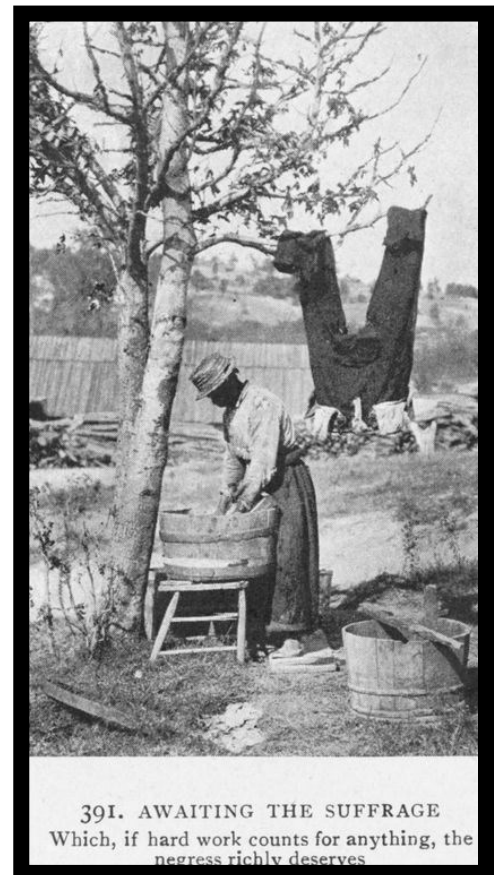
**More good news:
THE VOTE.
100 years ago US women
finally gained
the right to vote!**





Finally, after more than 70 years of petitions and fiery speeches and demonstrations and mistreatment, women won the right to vote when the [19th Amendment](#) to the US Constitution was ratified. On November 2, 1920, more than 8 million women across United States voted in elections for the first time. In that election, Warren G. Harding became the 29th President of the United States. Historians say that when the year ended, the country was weary of war, the virus, strikes, race riots, and terrorists. Sound familiar?

I want to add one caveat. As the Southern Poverty Law Center points out, “While the 19th Amendment was momentous, the reality was that it did not grant the franchise to all women in the United States. In practice, it ensured the franchise for primarily white, middle and upper class women; women of color largely did not enjoy the right to vote.” Although many suffragettes were abolitionists, when it came time to barter for the vote, “White women eventually realized that relying on racial exclusion would be the only way to get the Southern states to ratify the 19th Amendment.” I am reminded of Sojourner Truth’s plaintive cry, “Ain’t I a woman?”



In an article published this year for New York Times Magazine, historian Susan Ware noted, “The suffrage movement was not this finite, discrete thing. It wasn’t about one issue 100 years ago that a bunch of women in long dresses and big hats cared about. Getting the vote was an absolutely necessary step for everything that came afterward.”

What came after 1920? Hold on to your hats.

Two months after the election, the Volstead Act went into effect, banning the manufacture, sale, and transport of intoxicating liquors. **Prohibition** (which was fought for by many women whose family life had been ruined by drunken husbands and friends) brought with it its own social ills, including organized crime, tainted liquor, and a growing addiction to medicinal whiskey.

And just a few years afterward, the devastating effects of the **Great Depression** began to be felt, even in small townships like Nisswa. Writer Don Cosby’s words are an important reminder of those hard times.



“The Depression actually was far more severe and lasted more than 12 years. You didn’t necessarily have to lose money in the collapse of the stock market in order to experience the hard times. The subsequent 12 years that followed has gone down in history as a time when millions of families felt the pain of poverty due to no fault of their own.

*Most kids went barefoot until school started in the fall. Store bought clothes for the kids were a rarity except for extra special events. Nearly all little girls wore **feed sack dresses** made by their mothers. If there were two or three girls, the dress was made for the oldest. Guess what? The same dress was handed down to younger sisters for the next 3-4 years.*

A sack of hard candy and oranges and apples at Christmas were a real treat. I enjoyed Christmas like all kids, and making a list of things out of Sears Roebuck Catalog was fun — even though I knew Santa had no more money than Dad and Mom.

The house we lived in during that time only had two closets. When you opened the closet door the interior was only about 18 inches deep and two or three feet wide. When I got a little older, I asked Dad, 'Why would anyone build a clothes closet that small?' My Dad said, 'Son, when this house was built, that closet was plenty big! All you needed was two spike nails inside the closet: one nail to hang your dirty overalls on and one nail to hang your clean overalls on.' Now that's what I call poor."

The widespread poverty of the Great Depression did not deter The Nisswa Busy Bees. In their own minutes, the secretary recorded that the club wanted to continue to provide help for the needy by sewing quilts and layettes.

I like to imagine the positive energy that must have filled the hostess's home when those Busy Bees meetings took place. For in spite of all the hard work they had to accomplish in their own homes each day, I imagine 14 women devoted to their tasks, their long dresses hitched up, and their big hats set aside. I picture them filled with energy and purpose. I imagine the meeting patterned around support and laughter and hope.

How were the Busy Bees able to give away fabric and time when they could have used more of both themselves? That's an answer that all of us can ponder with gratitude and awe. The Busy Bees could have said, "We're weary of the hard times. We're weary of making do. After 12 years, we're just plain weary."

Instead, 14 women agreed that there was a need. 14 women chose to act. 14 women chose to care. With willing hands and generous hearts, 14 resourceful and resilient Busy Bees took their precious time and their equally precious materials — and they chose to share what they could with others — year after year after year. And in doing so, they created something very beautiful together.

**"Friendship is sewn with love
and measured by kindness."**



I think it is important for us to remember another aspect of those women's sewing clubs that were so popular throughout our country from the 1850's through the 1950's. Historians say that along with their charitable outreach, women learned valuable skills that resulted in great reforms for the entire nation. Local sewing clubs led to study groups, parenting classes, and adult education courses of all kinds. For the first time in their lives, many women were introduced to leadership roles, thanks to Robert's Rules of Order. Robert's Rules served women well as they began to participate in groups normally dominated by men. In the era of sewing clubs, many a woman said she learned how to speak before a group, lead a committee, make a motion, raise an objection, or demand clarification about an issue, thanks to the training she received in her sewing club, book group, or gardening club.

But first, women-only sewing groups like the Busy Bees granted housebound women the courage to speak openly and honestly with other women about the conditions they faced in their own lives. Openness and honesty brought about clarity and trust. While stitching a quilt, many hearts were filled and emboldened.

**“Our lives are like quilts — bits and pieces,
joy and sorrow,
stitched together with love.”**



“May your sorrows be patched and your joys be quilted.”

ONE HUNDRED YEARS

Now, a century has passed. The great-grandmothers and grandmothers of the Nisswa Women's Club are names in your archives now. Their efforts could just become the stuff of story and myth for you. However, I remember Suzanne Sundquist's remembrances about her grandmother and mother, who were active leaders of the Nisswa Women's Club in the late 1930's and 1940's. Although Suzanne distinctly remembers her mother using pretty glass trays that had an indentation sized perfectly for a delicate coffee cup, she knew that the Nisswa Women's Club meetings focused on far more than "ladies who lunch."

Suzanne's grandmother, Edith, was constantly on the go, helping others. Both Suzanne and her mother, Esther, inherited Edith's compassion for those who were struggling with life's challenges. Esther herself worked outside the home, drove her own car, and, like her mother, served as president of the club for several years.

Suzanne described the legacy of the Nisswa Women's Club so beautifully to me. She said, "I'm proud to be a part of a family and a club that have served our community. Sometimes, being a part of the Nisswa Women's Club is hard work, but I know that when everyone does just a little, all the small thoughts and actions add up to life-changing possibilities." Suzanne continued, "I served as treasurer for a number of years. I will never forget the day when one of our scholarship winners said to our group, 'Thank you for supporting me. I was able to buy a computer with your gift.' Another CLC student said her scholarship helped her pay for childcare and gas for her car. That was so moving to me," Suzanne added, "because I was never able to finish my own classes at Brainerd Junior College."



In honor of the heritage Suzanne continues to love and serve, I just had to include a picture of a classic quilt. It's called "Grandmother's Flower Garden," and yes, Suzanne's mother, Esther, was also part of the Nisswa Garden Club!

One hundred years have passed, but the pattern of care that those 14 Busy Bees established in the 1920's continues to flower!

I HOPE GRANDMOTHER'S FLOWER GARDEN WILL CONTINUE TO BLOOM



May you continue to plant a concern for others.



May you nurture a climate of cooperation.



May you enjoy the creativity that sparkles within you and among you!



May you treasure friendships that last well beyond the meetings.



May you marvel at your generosity of spirit, time, and energy.



May you always offer a welcome to new residents in the Lakes Area.

I HOPE YOU WILL TREASURE SOME OF YOUR BEST PATTERNS



Keep the Scholarships Coming!

Your fanciest quilt pattern is your Spring Style Show. The style show is always glorious! Every year your planners have been able to capture a mood or a theme with such sophistication and artistry. And even though the event seems to glide along effortlessly, behind the scenes, you know that a year of devoted planning, coordination and hard work support the completed and polished pattern.

Yes, the Spring Style Show is the preeminent quilt pattern you offer to the community. Yes, the public always clamors for tickets. Yes, there is usually a waiting list!

On May 26, I know you were disappointed that there was no fashion show. However, please remember this — as proud as you have always been of your style show, the most important pattern and the real reasons for the style show continue: you care about helping students in need; you want to promote the value of post high school education; and, you want young women who have had a rough time of it to know that there is a group of women who want them to succeed — and Central Lakes College is a great place to get a fresh start!

Let me be honest with you. I am no style show aficionado (as I write this letter in my grey sweats). After reading your club's history, I've changed my mind. Why? Over the years, the Nisswa Women's Club has increased its donations to scholarships again and again! Your effort to make a difference in the lives of students is an INCREDIBLE PATTERN. Now I want to declare, "Wow! Just look at what you've done!" May you always stitch an extravagant pattern in support of education! As an outsider, as a visitor, I'm ready to say, "How can I buy a ticket?" But first, I have to say, the statistics of your giving are inspiring!

- 1961** HS scholarships began
- 1973** 3 HS scholarships @ \$125 each were given
- 1987** 2 HS scholarships @ \$1,000 scholarships each were given
- 1996** 3 HS scholarships @ \$1,000 scholarships each were given
- 1999** 3 HS scholarships @ \$1,000 scholarships each AND
CLC scholarships @ \$500 each for non-traditional women students given
- 2003** 3 HS scholarships @ \$1,000 scholarships
 1 CLC scholarship @ \$1,000 for non-traditional woman student given
- 2007** 4 HS scholarships @ \$1,250 AND
 5 CLC scholarships for non-traditional women students given
-
- 2019** 6 HS scholarships @ \$1500 AND
 5 CLC scholarships @ \$1500 for non-traditional women students given
- NOTE:** Throughout the years, consistent monetary gifts have been given to CLC Foundation Scholarships (Endowment)



Continue to care for those in need

You have offered large, yearly donations to the **Lakes Area Food Shelf** and the **Mid-Minnesota Women’s Center**. Also, at my last count, in 2019 you made a big difference in the lives of people in this community through smaller donations to over 10 area organizations that provide humanitarian aid to people in need. 8 other community organizations asked for a bit of assistance and you gladly said, “yes.” Once again, you have declared, “We care about our neighbors.” In the best of times and in the worst of times, you are making a difference in peoples’ lives. May it continue, especially in this time of social distancing and new evidence of an economic downturn. After 100 years, people are standing in lines once again. As writer Don Cosby said earlier, our neighbors are feeling the pain of poverty through no fault of their own. With what you have, as best you can, I’m glad you are following your grandmothers’ examples.

🌸 Are you willing to design a quilt right from the headlines?

Are you tempted to go minimalist? Will you choose one or two basic colors to create and stitch your quilt? Sure, it keeps things simple. Using a few colors makes a neutral and calming palette. But, that's not the Nisswa Women's Club, is it?

I sense that you welcome all who would like to be a part of your community. In fact, from your own writing, I sense that your love of diversity is what makes the Nisswa Women's Club such an interesting group. Many of you have stated that the club has created a pattern that allows you to meet and learn from a variety of women from all walks of life.

After this difficult summer of jarring conflicts and protests across the nation, I hope you will make an effort to be even more open to women who might not be a part of your pattern right now. Who is missing from your meetings? Whose voice needs to be heard? Can you invite a neighbor or an acquaintance who might bring a new texture or color or flare to your group? I urge you to be open to the inclusion of all kinds of fabric . . . make your club a Surprising, Serendipity of Stitches! (I love that phrase. I found it in a quilting book. Will you use it, too?)

“Openness in any creative pursuit, such as quilting, is absolutely key. . . being open to new techniques and new ways of thinking about an age-old craft keeps the craft alive, and gives it a long life rather than something to be dabbled in.

Sharing a passion in a community setting amplifies its impact. Having people to back you up and to encourage you is important. The accountability spurs me on and I want to do the same for others. The quilting community has made my world bigger and my heart wider.”

~Andrea Tsang Jackson, Textile artist, quilt designer, author and educator





One last challenge for you.

Do you know what a UFO is? Lots of quilters have UFO's. No, they are not unidentified flying objects ... they are UNFINISHED OBJECTS — PARTIALLY SEWN QUILTS.

Quilters sometimes run out of fabric, lose interest, or feel like they have too many other obligations to complete a project. They have countless reasons to tuck a quilt away and never finish it. I hope the Nisswa Women's Club will never find a reason to label its best quilts as UFO's. Don't lose sight of your important work!

I hope you recognize that the community around you is better because of what you are and what you do. Together, you are stronger and warmer and more beautiful — and far more in demand than any one piece of fabric alone. Please continue to dream, to care, to hope, and to contribute!



And now, I stand amazed when I see the brand new pattern you have designed!

100 Years, 100 Women, \$100

Friends, this is such an easy pattern to follow! You can be a complete novice and still make this design work.


The 2020 Spring Style Show at Madden's Town Hall was destined to be a sell-out, but it didn't happen this year. You didn't buy a \$45 ticket, you didn't have to fill up the gas tank, you didn't even pick up a new lipstick or a bright scarf or that new pair of sassy sandals. Nope. None of your "ordinary" expenditures happened. So ... be honest. You've got that money tucked away somewhere, right?

Just think about the important details: you didn't spend a thing in May. Therefore, you didn't get to create that gorgeous, beautiful, stunning, incredible, breathtaking quilt: The Scholarship Quilt.

So, why not create that quilt in another way? You can do this. Make a crazy quilt!

The new school has already started. Just imagine how uncertain our high school seniors and CLC students must feel right now. Nothing is the way it used to be. We don't even know what the "new normal" will be. Why not add some interfacing (you know, the stuff that makes flimsy fabrics hold fast and firm) to the quilts these scholars need?


"How?" you ask.

 **100 Years, 100 Women, \$100? That's the crazy quilt. The Scholarship Quilt.**

The Bee — YOU —ti — FULL Quilt. Let's do it together!

It's so easy. C'mon. Join me. I'm not even a member of the Nisswa Women's Club. However, I love the idea of the Scholarship Quilt so much that I'm sending in my \$100.

If you haven't made a donation yet, will you match me? I hope so!

 **Well, my Busy Bee Friends, that's it. You can rest your eyes. I'm finished.**

Thanks for reading. Thanks for showing me your grandmother's quilts. Thanks for teaching me the history of your sewing club. Thanks for inspiring me with the legacy of education that you treasure. Thanks for putting up with my visitor's viewpoint and considering a stranger's advice.

I look forward to hearing about your future designs! I will be watching with great interest as you choose your next patterns, select your colors, straighten the warp of your fabric, and cut off any selvages that might make your pieces wonky. And, I can hardly wait to hear how you continue to grow your glorious tradition of generosity — in great style.

May every quilt you stitch be a blessing.

Sincerely,
Lilja Behr, Brainerd



SOME QUESTIONS FOR YOU TO CONSIDER

Some of you will be gathering for a ZOOM meeting on Thursday, September 17. I am including in this mailing some questions that you may wish to discuss together. I know that all of you may not be able to manage the ZOOM meeting, so I invite you to consider these questions on your own or perhaps with a friend by phone.

In November of 2019, **National Geographic** magazine published an issue entitled, "WOMEN A Century of Change." On the opening page, Editor Susan Goldberg highlighted the following points:

- Women around the world are rising up to demand civil, personal, and professional rights.
- Impressive, insightful women were asked the same questions that are on this page.
- All the women questioned espoused the same belief: women who follow their convictions can overcome almost anything.
- Women feel that they are finally being seen and heard on their own terms.

NOW IT'S TIME FOR YOU TO BE HEARD

1) Questions about YOU

- a. **What is the greatest hurdle you have had to overcome in your life?**
- b. **What is the most important challenge you face today?**
- c. **As a woman, what do you feel is your greatest strength?**

2) Questions that apply to all women

- a. **What is the most important challenge that women face today?**
- b. **Do you think it is important for women's voices to be heard? Why?**
- c. **How can we help each other to be agents of change?**

3) Questions for the Niswawa Women's Club

- a. **What challenges does the Niswawa Women's Club face today?**
- b. **What does this organization need to change in order to remain vital in the coming years?**
- c. **The Niswawa Women's Club has always tried to empower young women in this community. Where do you think that empowerment is needed the most? Can you imagine new ways to support and mentor young women?**

