

Memories from a Viking Dealer

By Penelope Marie Doeden

During my senior year of high school, I worked for a sewing machine company selling overpriced models to unsuspecting city slickers with too much disposable income. At the time, I had wanted the job to buy a sewing machine, but I never actually made enough to buy one. Viking machines are notoriously expensive, and while you can make your case that the price is worth it, it wasn't worth the nearly \$5,000 price tag for the machine I wanted. They sit squarely on the pricey side of the sewing machine world, feature cutting-edge technology, and are usually covered in LCD screens. While they might not be anywhere near as reliable as other brands, and not as popular as Juki and Bernina, a very small dedicated group of sewists love them nonetheless.

Technically speaking, I was working as a temp for my boss as she went on vacation. For this story, we'll call her Sue. I started the job around May, and she had me fully trained by June. I worked inside a Viking Sewing Gallery. It was Viking's internal dealer network, designed to allow the company to bypass independent dealer commissions, with the help of Jo-Ann Fabrics. Inside the store, we sold Viking sewing machines, alongside a couple of the higher-end Singer models that Jo-Ann refused to sell, machine accessories, and stabilizers. I loved working for Viking. The hours were terrible; I only worked about once a week on average, but at least I got to work. It was my greatest happiness, surrounded by sewing machines, inside one of the few places I can call 'nirvana.' I'd like to present some of my favorite memories in the style of a journal.

May 15th, 2023

I still remember the smell of the store, especially during training. I think at the time, they were moving the fleece on Jo-Ann's side from the winter season into storage, as it got replaced by bolts of printed cotton and sheer polyester. It smelled like fabric, like holding a bolt of fleece directly to your face and breathing it in, along with the slightly acrid stench of the 30-year-old shopping plaza the store sat in, slowly aging as time crept along. I had drunk an iced tea from Caribou earlier, and that was stuck in my nose, too. Peaches and Fleece. That's what it smelled like. The scent lingered for the whole time that I was there, compounded by the fact that I regularly had to go back into the storage area, where the fleece was tucked away, awaiting its time to shine.

Sue was teaching me how to make demo packs. They're little packs of fabric that contain multiple different kinds of applications our machines could be used for. I hated making

\them. So much. But I didn't tell her that. I didn't want to spoil our unexpected friendship. She wore this perfume, the kind that you could only get in the glass cabinet at Walgreens. I don't remember what kind it was, but it was simply divine. Sometimes, I ask them for samples, and I'll try to find hers. It reminds me of simpler times. She acted as something of an anchor during that turbulent period. I was a functioning alcoholic, and my peers could barely stand to look at me, only months into my transition. I felt horrific, like the monster that kids think is under their beds. Sue didn't see that, or at least she didn't tell me. She loved to complain about my flats and poke me in the side for always forgetting to lock my purse in the cabinet, but sometimes it felt like she had the kind of love for me that only a mother can have.

May 27th, 2023

Sue wasn't at the store that day. She might have been sick, but the exact reasoning escapes me. My other coworker, we'll call her Maria, was there instead to teach me about the quilting machines. While I'm a quilter myself, in truth, a quilting machine is just a sewing machine with a couple of extra bells and whistles that would need a detailed explanation to show the difference. We sat at that birch table for hours

as she grilled me on all of the functions the Epic 95Q had. I don't remember them. It had lasers, though, I remember that. She had me create little quilt squares, just pieces of calico with batting in between, nothing fancy.

I made hundreds of them with dozens of different messages, and sometimes, I would embroider the cotton squares beforehand on one of the embroidery machines. Maybe I still have some of the squares. I can't remember. I do remember making them after that day, obsessing over them with scrutiny yet unseen by a teenager. I still have the itch to make quilts to this day. I've included some of the messages below.

Home is wherever your heart is

Peace, Love & Quilting

Family is found in the oddest places

Friends are Forever

I love my family, but I love my VIKING more

I'd rather be Sewing

Sew the love into the world

I have too much fun with my VIKING

Keep the world sewing

June 30th, 2023

I must have been late for work that day due to traffic. I don't remember anymore, but I know that Sue was a little miffed that I hadn't called her at 10 but at 11 to notify her that the store was open. I spent most of the day dusting. It was so boring, but I did have some fun. I made a couple of new embroidery designs on the Designer Epic 2. I still have photos of the email sent out that morning panicking over a fruit design. I think it was because nobody had realized how messed up it was until it had already destroyed a demo machine. They told us that the design would cause the needle to snap, and it had rendered an Epic 2 and a Ruby 90 dead in the water. Several customers came in for the pattern, but they all left empty-handed. It was one of those gift-with-purchase type deals to get people to buy more presser feet and stabilizers.

I had a breakfast sandwich for lunch that day. It was also from the Caribou, directly across the street. I loved stopping at that place; they were always so friendly. I think I made demo packs while I ate. Such details are often lost to time. That was the day that we heard that a lady we'll call Clara was leaving the company. She was Sue's boss, and she didn't even give them a week's notice. She just up and left. It was wild. We didn't realize then that it was evidence of the rot inside the company, and she was the first to see it.

July 15th, 2023

I still remember my biggest sale. I sold someone a Brilliance 75Q and a Huskylock S21. I nearly cried when I finished that purchase; I had sold nowhere even close to that much product in ages, and it was my crowning achievement. It was a nightmare getting it to the customer's car, but the \$7,000 sale I put into the blue book more than made up for it. It was exhilarating, almost childlike in its quality. I ran to the cutting counter, telling as many people as I could. I was so proud that I even forgot to eat lunch. Sue called me later in the day, and she was so happy that I had done it. Usually, the store barely made it into the black, but with such a large sale under my belt, we were hopeful that maybe we could turn a modest profit that quarter.

That day, I think I processed \$90,000 in new inventory from the truck. It's a little odd thinking about the fact that it was only four sewing machines and a serger, but it was one spendy little store. I don't know if they've sold those Epic 95Qs to this day. That's how few we moved. We made most of our revenue off the backs of our budget models, the H-Class and Emerald series machines. I sold about 20 of each over my time with the company.

\August 1st, 2023

This is the last real day on the job I can remember. We had just gotten the product information on the Onyx machines, the replacements for the H-Class models. We got a packet in the mail, all glossy and laminated pages, proudly proclaiming that this was the pinnacle of Viking design. They weren't. They had issues from day one, and I can remember that day, the display model we set up broke simply from being turned on. It was symbolic of the company as a whole. Ever-higher prices for the ever diminishing quality of our consumer products, with the "cream of the crop" staying similar to machines of the past as their prices hit the ceiling.

Sue was so excited to see the new inventory. She told me that the promise of a new machine, even if it sucked, could bring in double their normal sales and that it could help fill up the blue book. In hindsight, I know that her desperation to fill the blue book wasn't some prideful attempt to be the best, but to cling to her job as the company gutted itself from the inside out. We all knew that the company would dissolve the retail division; it was just a matter of when. That day, though, I was diligent in my work to get people to try it out, and I ran little classes to show people all of the functions of their new machines. That's what made the company what it was: the dedication of the retail division to make the product lineup something it wasn't. We tried so hard to offer warranties and make tune-ups before they even left the store in the hopes that it would give us just one more sale to list on the ledger.

Present

Viking would end up dissolving the division. When Jo-Ann declared bankruptcy this year, Viking laid off the entire internal dealer network and announced it would be closed by April 15th. It's just around the corner from my perspective, but I like not to think about that. Maria would end up leaving the store when they announced the closure, since she never really needed the job. Sue, for her 35 years with the company, was offered \$750 and asked to stay until they sold the store furnishings. She stayed. When I visited the store a month ago, she told me about how she had no idea what to do, and with no retirement account in place, she may end up homeless. The hardest part of leaving was that I had no way to help her, other than a couple of words. I wish I could have given her something. Maybe one of those quilt squares. In the end, Viking is a shitty company, but the people made it what we remember it as. In a life that continued to beat me down, I had found a small group of people who saw me for who I wanted to be, unconditionally. That little sliver of happiness was so euphoric, so exuberant, and I'll hold onto it forever.