

**Zeitschrift:** Swiss textiles [English edition]  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss office for the development of trade  
**Band:** - (1964)  
**Heft:** 1

**Artikel:** The fascinating history of the sewing-machine  
**Autor:** [s.n.]  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-798155>

#### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

#### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

#### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 23.01.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**



The millionth Bernina zig-zag sewing-machine, bearing a commemorative plaque in gold, takes its place in the Bernina sewing-machine museum

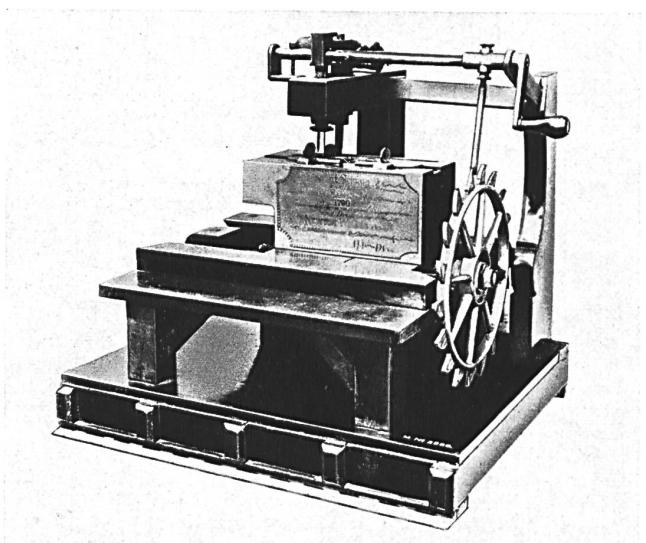
## The Fascinating History of the Sewing-Machine

During the summer of 1963, Fritz Gegauf Ltd., at Steckborn (Switzerland), makers of « Bernina » sewing-machines, completed the construction of their millionth Bernina zig-zag sewing-machine. This *historic* model was not put on the market but placed, bearing a commemorative plaque in gold, in the sewing-machine museum created by Fritz Gegauf Ltd. in the premises of their Steckborn factory. The occasion provided an opportunity of viewing this interesting collection.

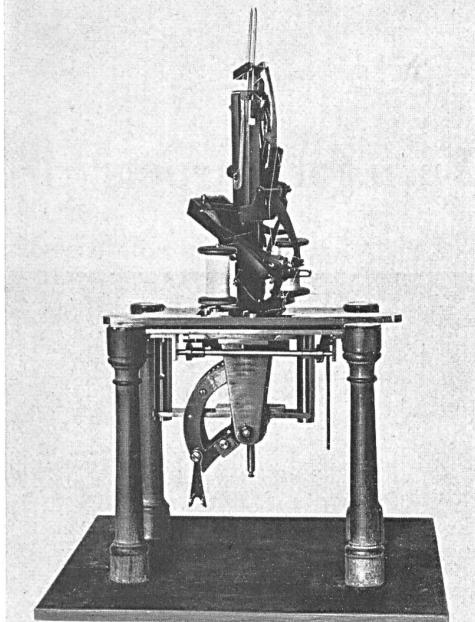
Before becoming the little gems of precision and elegance that we know today and which no modern home would be without, sewing-machines, like all big inventions, followed a path beset by many ups and downs. It is two centuries, in fact, since a German, who had emigrated to England, patented an apparatus which can be considered as the hypothetical ancestor of the present-day sewing-machine although meeting with no success in its day; the same fate was reserved for the invention of an Englishman who took out a patent in 1790 for a chain-stitch sewing-machine. Later still, a Tyrolean tailor built a machine which worked perfectly and for which in 1814 he was granted an imperial license by the Austrian Emperor Francis 1st, which did not however prevent him from ending his days in the poor-house. In 1830, it was the turn of a Frenchman, who succeeded in interest-

ing the Minister of War in his sewing-machine and installing some 80 models in a workshop which was to make uniforms for the army. Unfortunately the tailors of Paris, feeling their material interests threatened by this innovation, broke up and completely destroyed the machines; the inventor, who was reduced to giving Punch and Judy shows in order to scrape a living, also died in poverty. Finally, in 1845, an American, Elias Howe, produced a sewing-machine that used two yarns, like present-day machines, and which could do 300 stitches a minute. In spite of an initial success, he found no buyer for his apparatus, which cost \$300.—, and went off to England where his reception was no better. On returning to his native country, he was surprised to see that several manufacturers had taken up his idea and perfected it. One of them in particular, J.M. Singer, began to work the invention. Howe brought a lawsuit against him, which he won, and was then recognized as the inventor of the sewing-machine. The rival manufacturers were ordered to pay Howe a certain sum for each machine they sold. Howe relinquished this right in 1860 and founded a factory of his own, which produced over 100,000 machines.

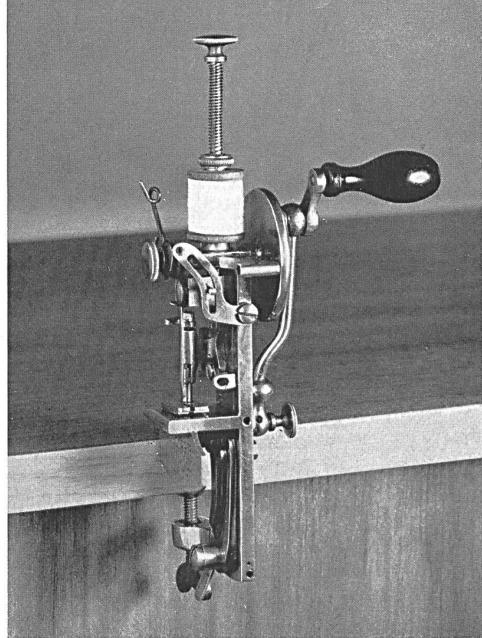
This new industry was soon introduced onto the continent of Europe. In 1893, a Swiss, Fritz Gegauf, built the first hem-stitching machine in the world, which he soon succeeded in exporting. The fluctuations in fashion having compromised the future of hem-stitching, Gegauf took up the construction of a sewing-machine for use in the



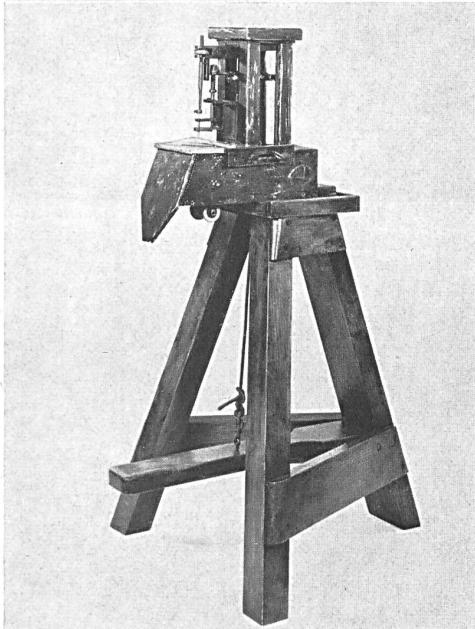
The sewing-machine invented by the Englishman Thomas Saint, patented in 1790. Made of wood, this machine did chain-stitching



3



6



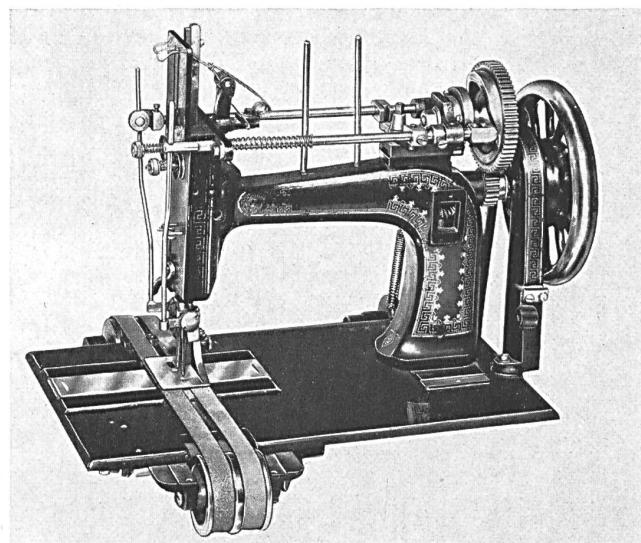
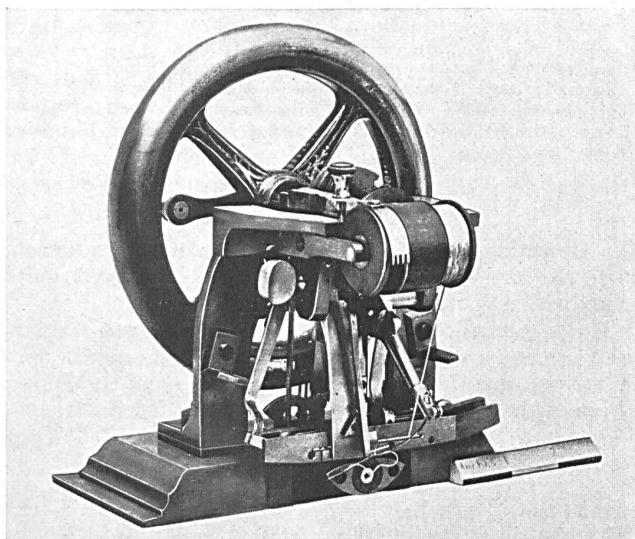
4

- 3 The machine of the Tyrolean Joseph Madersperger, for which the latter was granted an imperial license in 1815
- 4 The machine invented by the Frenchman B. Thimonnier, and destroyed by Parisian tailors in a military uniform workshop in Paris
- 6 The smallest sewing-machine, offered in 1887 as a pocket machine. It produced very fine running stitches with two threads

home, which was the starting point of the present Bernina factory. The first Swiss zig-zag sewing-machine for home use was placed on the market by the Bernina factory in 1938 and, in 1943, this firm was the first in the world to produce a free-arm zig-zag sewing-machine for use in the home.

Opposite we show some of the historic models of sewing-machines on show in the Bernina museum at Steckborn.

The first hem-stitching machine in the world, manufactured in 1893 by Fritz Gegauf at Steckborn



Elias Howe, in 1845, achieved a remarkable step forward: the use of two threads for sewing: a lower thread passed by a shuttle through the loops of an upper thread guided by the needle.