

Find a Vintage Sewing Machine



Chatterbox Quilts



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Finding and Evaluating

A Little Effort Goes a Long Way

When shopping for sewing machines, people often overlook vintage machines completely. This is a shame because they could be missing out on a good deal on a quality machine. Older SINGER® sewing machines are a great choice because of the variety of models, their quality and the availability of machines and replacement parts. Not only will you get a dependable workhorse of a machine, but you may also end up with a work of industrial art that you can proudly display in your home.

SINGER® produced so many sewing machines over its long history that it can be overwhelming when faced with all the choices that are available. When I think of the different models I tend to break the machines into four major groups (*Manual, Classic, Transitional, and Modern*) based on their appearance and (roughly) when they were made:

- Manual - machines made prior to the 1920's
- Classics - machines made after the 1920's
- Transitional - machines made after what I call the Classics and before the 1960's.
- Modern - machines produced in a period that spans from the 1960's to today.

This method of categorization provides a handy shortcut that helps me when I encounter a machine for the first time. This is definitely not the only way to group the models, but it is a way to organize all the choices based on which features are important to me.



SINGER® 221 “Featherweight”

Where to Find a Machine

Let the Search Begin

Now that you have decided on the type of machine that you want, you need to start looking for it. The good news is that there are usually lots of good machines available and they are typically easy to find. There are two methods to find a machine – online or on foot.

The method you choose will depend on where you live and how much time you want to invest in driving around looking for a good deal. As an example, neglected machines can be really cheap at yard sales but you may have to visit a lot of sales before you find the machine you want and you may not be able to plug it in to see if it runs.

The availability of machines will be dependent on where you live. In some places you can find a machine in a yard sale while in other places (like where I live) the best place to find a machine is in the online want ads.

No matter how you shop for your machine there will be plenty of opportunity to get a good deal if you are patient. And if you are like me, the “thrill of the hunt” is part of the fun of owning a vintage machine.

Online Shopping

My favourite method for shopping for a machine is online. I like the convenience of shopping without having to drive all over just to look at the machine. There is usually enough information in the ads that allows me to do some research to determine if this is a model that I might consider buying. I can often contact the seller if I require more information or additional photographs to decide if it is worth the trip to look at the actual machine or to purchase it online.

One thing to keep in mind if you are looking at a machine online is to be sure that the photo online is actually that of the machine for sale. I have encountered sellers who use a photo of a machine that they've found online which isn't a photo of the actual machine that they are selling – it's just a great photo. Some sellers may say that they have a machine for sale that is similar to the photo they're posting – beware of these sellers. I can guarantee you that their machine won't be in the same condition as the photo they have posted!

Online Sales and Auctions

Machines sold on online sales sites such as eBay or specialty stores tend to be more expensive, especially when you factor in the cost of shipping (these machines are heavy). In the case of eBay,

Evaluating a Machine

Is It Too Good To Be True?

Searching for a machine can be quite time consuming. I like to do as much research as I can before I actually purchase a machine so I can be sure it is worth my time to go see it or to be confident enough of what I am getting to order it online. When I first consider a machine I try to get a feel for its overall condition. If my overall impression of the machine is favourable then it is time to assess the state of its various working parts.

Research Before You Go

Shopping Methods Affect The Research You Do

If you have decided to purchase a specific sewing machine model, you can research it online and can act quickly when you find that model for sale. You'll just need to find out the condition of the specific machine and decide if the price is right. The effort required to find information on a sewing machine you are considering will depend a lot on where you're purchasing it. If the machine is advertised on an online classified ad site, eBay, or even a store's website then you can usually get a lot of information relatively easily. There is typically a detailed description of the machine and many photos from all angles. You can usually contact the seller via email if you require more information or additional photos.

I purchase most of my machines from online classified ads so I have the luxury of getting the information electronically. I can usually find a manual for that model online so I can determine if I'm interested in that particular machine or not. If I can't find information about a particular model, I don't bother to go see it. I won't know enough about the features of the machine or how it works to decide if I'd like to buy it, let alone if the price is reasonable. I prefer to be an informed purchaser.

If you haven't chosen a model yet it can be a little trickier because you may have to do your research after you have found a machine. For example, if you find a machine at a yard sale you are going to have to decide on whether to buy the machine without knowing everything about it or go home, do your research, and make a trip back once you have that information. You may find that someone else has purchased the machine by that time.

I bought this SINGER® 301 at an estate sale.

A Closer Look

If you have a good overall impression of the machine and you are happy with the attachments that are included, it is time to investigate the machine itself to assess the state of the various working parts.

I am an enthusiastic collector and am looking for a sewing machine that will actually stitch so when I'm considering a sewing machine I want it to be in reasonable condition. I don't mind cleaning up the machine body and doing some small repairs, but I am not looking for a machine that I have to strip right down and completely clean and restore. When I'm checking out a machine I'm looking to see if the motor runs, if the machine stitches and if all the parts are on the machine. There are adjustments that can be made to the machine to improve its performance, such as adjusting the foot controller and the motor belt, but these can be done after I've purchased the machine. I'm more concerned to see if the machine will sew: the condition of the machine body, decals and metalwork are not a primary concern for me, although I do like a classic shiny, unscratched black SINGER® with pristine decals!

Wiring

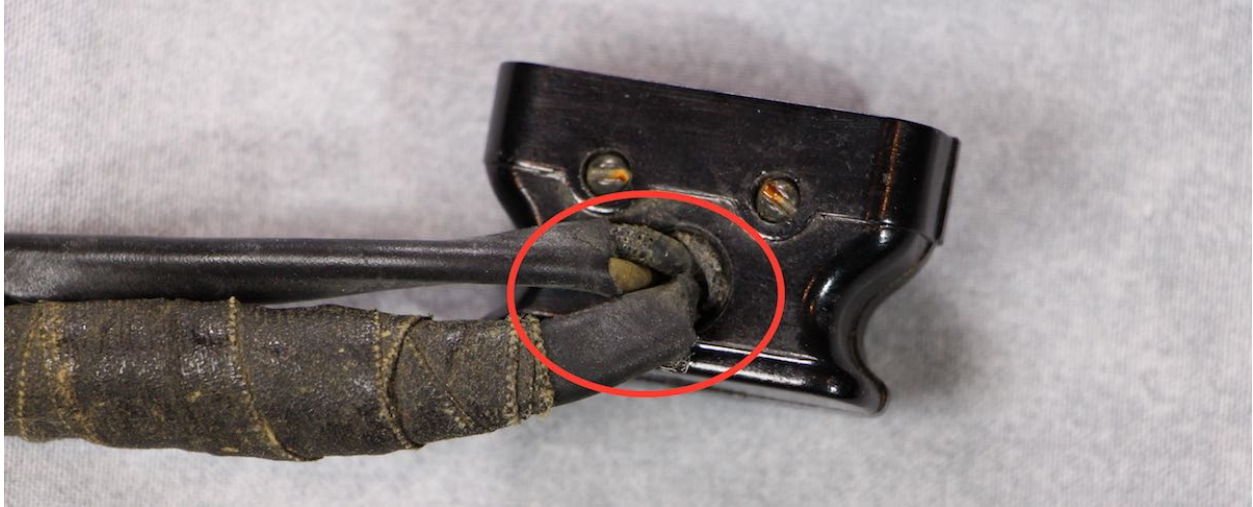
First a note of caution before you plug the machine in!

Check all the wiring on the machine. It's usually fairly obvious if there are wiring issues from the foot pedal to the cord or from the machine to the cord. Look for bare wires showing or broken wires. Be sure to check the entire length of the cord as well.

If there are bare wires, don't plug it in or you may get a shock. These older machines are all metal and many do not have an on/off switch so the whole machine will become electrified if there is a short from a bare wire - as will you! If you really want the machine, it is safer to take the machine "as-is" and negotiate a lower selling price knowing you will be taking a risk that it may not operate even after you have fixed the wiring.

Having said that, these machines are relatively simple and robust so if the mechanical parts appear okay, the machine usually operates fine once the electrical issues are fixed. If you aren't comfortable working with electric wires, you can have an expert fix it for you. If the problem is with the foot pedal wires, you can buy a complete new foot pedal set inexpensively.

This was the case when I purchased the SINGER® 128. The cord was so badly damaged that I hesitated to plug it in. The rest of the machine was in good shape and I knew I could repair the cord so I took the risk that I could get it operating again.



Damaged Cord from the SINGER® 128

Light

Turn on the light to see if it works. Lights may be controlled with a switch or they may just turn on when the machine is plugged in. If the light doesn't come on, it may just need a new bulb or the entire fixture may need to be replaced. For me this isn't a deal breaker and I have yet to get a machine where the light didn't work.



Light Switch on SINGER® 128

Sewing

The big test is to see if the machine sews. Before you do this, check and clean out the bobbin area, insert a wound bobbin, and thread the machine. You may need to change the needle. This is where the manual comes in very handy. Refer to it when performing these functions. You'll need to locate the foot pedal as this isn't always obvious. Check up under the cabinet, if the machine is in one, as this is often where the foot pedal is hiding

If you can turn the hand wheel easily, it's probably okay to try to make the machine run using the foot pedal or knee lever. If you can't turn the hand wheel, you may have to apply some oil and then try again. If it's really stuck, you may not be able to test the motor and have to decide if you think you'll be able to get the machine working with more oiling or if you may pass on this particular machine.

Bobbin or Shuttle

Ensure that there is a bobbin case and at least one bobbin in the machine. While it can be easy to acquire additional bobbins, it can be difficult and expensive to get another bobbin case. You won't be able to test the machine without either of them. If the machine has a vibrating shuttle make sure that there is a shuttle case in the machine. If there isn't a partially wound bobbin in the machine, you'll have to wind a bobbin before trying out the machine.

Check bobbin winder tire for cracking or wear. This may have to be replaced, but these are easy to acquire. Check the manual to see how to wind a bobbin on this particular model. Ensure that the spool pin for bobbin is on the machine and not broken off (on bobbin winder and also on base of machine or on top of machine). Check for threads or lint caught in bobbin race.



Shuttle & Long Bobbin



Round Bobbin and Case

Vintage Sewing Machine 101

Series

This book is part of the Vintage Sewing Machine 101 Series from Chatterbox Quilts. The series consists of five ebooks that will provide you with all that you need to know about buying and restoring a vintage Singer sewing machine.

Vintage Singer Sewing Machines

Learn what a vintage Singer sewing machine is, how to decide on a model, and why you should buy one.

The Collection

Learn about the features of the various vintage Singer sewing machines by taking a tour of the machines in Kim's collection.

Find a Vintage Sewing Machine

Learn where to buy and how to evaluate the specific machine when you are about to make a purchase.

Restore a Vintage Singer Sewing Machine

Learn how to restore, repair and maintain your new purchase.

Vintage Singer Sewing Machine Projects

Instructions on how to make two projects using your newly acquired vintage Singer sewing machine.