

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EARLY QUILTING  
from the 1999  
Beach Art Museum exhibition "Kansas Quilts Past and Present"

The art of piecing, sewing together pieces of cloth to create a large piece has probably existed since the Stone Age, where man surely pieced together animal pelts to make clothing and coverings. The practice of quilting or stitching together a sandwich of two layers of fabric with some sort of warm stuffing in between is not nearly so old --the earliest known quilted garment is on the carved figure of a Pharaoh of the Egyptian First Dynasty, ca. 3400 BC. An existing piece of quilted fabric, designed as a floor covered, was discovered on the floor of a tomb in Mongolia and was made between the 1st century B.C. and the 2nd century AD. The piece is elaborately quilted in large scroll and spiral designs and has appliquéd forms of trees and animals. Forms of appliquéd, a design of applied cloth stitched on to another piece of fabric, can be found in many cultures from as early 908 B.C.

The first reference to appliquéd or pieced work on a quilted bed covering dates from France in the 12th century --a quilted bed covering of silk cloth pieced together in a checkerboard pattern. References to early quilts occur throughout Europe, and quilting itself was used as often for clothing and bedding as witnessed by elegant quilted petticoats and underskirts. Patchwork was probably just as popular among the lower classes.

The first quilts in America were probably a type of quilt referred to as whole cloth, two pieces of solid cloth with batting in between which was intricately quilted, or appliquéd and quilted. Patchwork or pieced quilts were generally a later development, due to the necessity of reusing the limited resources available. This tradition continued as settlers pushed back the boundaries of their new homeland. Since there are no descriptions and no surviving quilts from the earliest years of settlement, it is difficult to know what happened stylistically.

The earliest surviving American-made quilt is that of Sarah Sedgewick Leverett and her daughter, Elizabeth, in 1703 and is of pieced triangles in silk, brocade and velvet with an angel appliquéd in the center. Other early quilts feature geometric pieced designs, including stars, and appliquéd coverlets made of printed chintz with central medallions and several frames or borders. A few quilts exist from the early part of the 18th century, but it is after 1775 and especially after 1825 that we see a huge proliferation of extant quilts.

Quilts played an interesting role in the lives of women. Creating textiles for the home was a primary task for women, although weaving and tailoring were male professions. Women received relatively little schooling, and what they did receive often focused on utilitarian and fancy needlework. For the well-off young women, her needlework, including embroidery and quilts, was a way to show prospective suitors that she was ready to manage a household. In addition, needlework was a way to brighten a home and a form of artistic expression.

Quilting later assumed a highly social function. Getting together to quilt, often called a quilting bee, justified a visit with neighbors seldom seen. By the middle of the 19th century, quilting was taken up by church groups and women's societies as a way to raise money for good causes. And for the Victorian woman, quilting was a way to decorate her home and create an opulent cushion against the outside work.

## EARLY SETTLEMENT AND IMMIGRATION IN KANSAS

Before Kansas became a territory in 1854, it was closed to white settlement since the land was reserved for the Native Americans. Although quilts most certainly traveled through the area on the Santa Fe and Chisholm trails, they were not made in Kansas --the ideas of sewing in the covered wagon is really a myth because settlers walked to save the horses and the ride was usually too bumpy nor did they get left behind.

With the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, Kansas Territory became a destination. The Territory quickly became embroiled in the questions of slavery and groups of slaveholders from Missouri poured into the arm at the same time as Free-Staters or abolitionists from New England and Ohio. At this point, far more bedding including quilts was brought in to Kansas than were actually made here. In fact, although diary accounts record quilting during these early years of settlement, so far no quilts have been proved to have been made in the state before 1861.

Quilting became a part of the life of the early settlers as soon as there was a bit of free time and scraps to put together. In 1859, Henrietta Woodward reports a sewing society in Grasshopper (Valley) Falls, the purpose being to furnish the Congregational Church [Kansas Historical Quarterly (summer 1971), Letters of Reverend O.L. Woodford and his sister Henrietta] By 1863, the women of the Wyandotte Ladies Aid Society had made a quilt which won second prize at the First Kansas State Fair [Kansas Farmer], Dec. 1, 1863].

With the Homestead Act of 1862, the end of the Civil War, and the development of the railroad, settlement literature flooded the eastern United States and Europe. Population in Kansas tripled in the 1870s & The Mennonites came to Kansas in the 1870s and settled in the central part of the state. Volga Germans settled in the Hays area in the 1880s and 1890s. Swedes settled near Beloit soon after 1858 and in central Kansas in 1868. African-Americans settled in Kansas City in the 1870s and in the western Kansas town of Nicodemus in 1877. Italians, French and groups from the Balkans settled in the coal mining towns around Pittsburg in the 1870s and 1880s. The Welsh settled in Emporia beginning in 1869. Various other groups settled in Kansas as well, including the Irish in small groups from 1855 on, and the Danes in 1869. And a large number of immigrants came from Mexico near the end of the 19th century to work on the railroads.

Each of these groups brought cultural traditions with them and at the same time assimilated the current fashions, including those in quilting. Certainly many of the new settlers had used either piecing or quilting or both in Europe, but it seems that they were heavily influenced by their new neighbors who were already ensconced in such American quilting traditions as the log cabin quilt and the crazy quilt. Certainly only a few quilts exist in Kansas that appear to be European styles. One group, the Native Americans who had been pushed to the reservations and were served by the Mission school, adopted quilting but made it their own with the addition of their tribal symbols.

Quilt names of this period began to reflect political events such as the Civil War and the settlement of the frontier. In fact, patterns were often re-named as time passed. For example, the 1800 pattern Job's

Tears became Slave Chain in 1825. It became Texas Tears in 1840, and after the Civil War, was known as the Rocky Road to Kansas. Today it is known as the Endless Chain.

One popular quilt fashion in the last half 19th century was the red and green appliqué quilt. Many of these quilts were brought to Kansas from Kentucky, Indiana and Ohio and were copied by Kansas quilters. These quilts were influenced partly by chintz fabrics and partly by German fraktur-schriften (decorative calligraphy). Red and green were popular wall, drapery and carpet colors in homes during the late 19th century, especially with the existence of color-fast Turkey Red and the development of a color-fast green dye in the 1840s. By the end of the century, indigo and white patterns had replaced red and green, reflecting the new craze for blue and white china patterns. Log Cabin quilts were also very popular. The scraps used could be quite small and since they were sewn onto a backing, construction was simple compared to other pieced patterns.

Another identifiable trend during this period was the use of printed cotton, including conversation or object prints' (the print represented an object like a horseshoe or an anchor rather than the traditional floral prints), in pieced quilts. These factory-produced dry goods were used for clothing and the scraps found their way into the quilts of the frontier. These fabrics came from the dry goods stores that were cropping up with settlement but could also be ordered as early as 1872 from the Montgomery Wards catalogue, which began its list of goods with "Cotton Prints." By 1886, Montgomery Wards was in competition with Bloomingdale Brothers and later with Sears, Roebuck and Company, which began offering dry goods in 1895.

Technology also brought the sewing machine, and in the period between 1856 to 1860, over 130,000 sewing machines were sold. The editor of Godey's Lady's Book declared the sewing machine a time-saving device in 1860, 'By this invention the needlewoman is enabled to perform her labor in comfort; task that used to require the midnight watches -and drag through perhaps 20 hours, she can now complete in two or three' It is common to find early Kansas quilts that have been machine-pieced or machine-quilted and more often than not, binding tapes were machine-sewn on a quilt that was otherwise worked by hand.

## CRAZY QUILTS

Crazy quilts first become popular around 1870 and remained so until the early 1900s. The first mention of the word "Crazy" being used to describe the random and asymmetrical pattern was found in the Cultivator and Country Gentleman magazine of 1878 and referred to a canvas needlework cushion worked by several ladies, each in their own fashion. By the 1880s crazy patchwork had reached a peak. The Centennial Exposition influenced these quilts with its highlights of Japanese art, including crazed (cracked) ceramics, and embroidered silks and fans with asymmetrical designs. These quilts were often smaller than bed-sized and were used as lap robes and throws. The lush velvet, silk and brocade fabrics were cut in "crazy" or broken and splintered pieces and were usually embellished with silk embroidery at the seam.

Reuse of fabric in this case was more for nostalgic than practical reasons. The crazy quilter was more likely to be an upper class Philadelphia matron than a struggling pioneer wife. The fabric reflected luxurious clothing such as silk dresses and velvet jackets. Fine embroidery work was a leisure-time pursuit. It was a time-consuming process, and it allowed a woman to show off their skills with the needle.

Contemporary women's magazine published embroidery patterns and stitching styles. Animals and flowers were especially popular. Some quilters believed that embroidering a spider on its web would bring good luck. Crazy quilts often included names, verses and dates. These quilts, as "artworks," were more likely to carry the signature of the maker, and they were often used as signature and fund raising quilts by women's groups.

Eventually, crazy quilting made its way to the frontier. Those who were lucky enough to have some fine fabrics or cast-offs and scraps from wealthier relatives in the East could create more luxurious quilts, and winter may have granted women a bit more time for fancy work. Women on the frontier could also adapt, often using material from sample books from dry goods stores, or simply using everyday fabrics instead of silks and velvets. Crazy quilting could also be done without the fancy stitchwork.

There is a strong similarity between crazy quilts and the utilitarian tied quilts of the Volga Germans and the Mennonites. On careful examination, the utilitarian quilts are made of rectangular pieces fitted together. The crazy quilts tend to include more triangles and curved pieces and would have taken more time to fit together.

The traditional crazy quilt reflects the overall style of the Victorian era. These lush quilts were used in parlors as part of lavish household decorations. Not only were they symbols of comfort and well being, they indicated that the women of the household were wealthy enough to have leisure time. In America, people became nostalgic for the "old days" with the centennial celebrations, and the crazy quilts with their scraps of memories such as wedding dresses and christening robes represented an older and pleasanter time. In addition, in the cities of England and America, which were becoming more industrialized and beset with urban problems, these accouterments would cocoon the family in luxury and beauty, padding them from the outside world. It was increasingly the role of the woman to protect her family from the cruel world, and this coincides with the new role of women as social advocate, fighting for the suffrage, abolitionism and temperance movements and an end to child labor.

As the Colonial Revival and Arts and Crafts movements took hold in the early 1900s, crazy quilts became regarded as one of the worst examples of Victorian over-ornamentation, and quilters turned back to the simple pieced patterns of their grandmothers.

## LADIES SOCIETIES AND SIGNATURE QUILTS

During the later part of the 19th century, groups of women centered around noble causes became very popular, especially in urban areas. The first groups were focused on the Civil War; after the war a number of causes were popular. Among these groups was the WCTU (Women's Christian Temperance Union) founded in 1874 (there was actually a temperance group in Pottawatomie County as early as 1839). The quilts made by these groups featured T patterns, the blue and white Drunkard's Path and the Goblet Pattern, which looked like an upright goblet holding pure water or an upside down bottle with liquor being poured from it! A signature on this type of quilt identified one as a member of the movement.

Church groups such as Ladies Aid and Missionary societies were especially popular; where in Kansas they reflected the strong Protestant religious network. A major focus of these groups was fund-raising,

and Sampler and Signature Quits were a popular way to raise money. One style used was the Album Quilt, where each woman created her own square and the group quilted the piece. In a second style, the signature became part of the design of these quilts so that not only could one raffle off the quilt to raise money, the makers could also charge for the signature. The development of permanent ink in the 1830s aided in the popularity of these quilts.

Signature or Autograph Quits were also popular in schools, where needlework was still part of the curriculum up until World War II. Signature quilts made excellent parting gifts for teacher and were also a substitute for bake sales when it came to raising money for the classroom.

Signature and Friendship Quits were used to commemorate a variety of events from weddings and births to the departure of a friend in search of greener pastures. These quilts could be signed or simply made of pieces collected from friends. In the current popular novel *The Persian Pickle Club* by Sandra Dallas, a signature quilt was made for a member who moved away from Harveyville, Kansas, to remind her of her friends.

### THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

There was a decrease in settlement and a rise in Kansas made quilts between 1900 - 1924. This period was characterized by an increase in manufactured goods due to the railroad and mail order and the availability of inexpensive fabrics due to technology. The English Arts and Crafts movement, which emphasized the hand-made, was quickly adopted in America. In addition, the Colonial Revival Movement idealized America's colonial past in both architecture and home decorating. All these factors lead to a revival of traditional quilt making.

Quilts surviving from the first quarter of the 20th century were generally rather dark, made of scraps of print fabrics, with dark blue, maroon and grey as predominant color schemes. Many of these quilts were tied rather than quilted. The quilts of this period also began to reflect natural motifs, floral appliqués being especially popular.

For some reason, many of the tops of the early 20th century were left unquilted to be finished by latter generations. This may be due to a decline in the cooperative quilting bee during the period, with most of this work being done by church groups and social clubs. In fact, there are records of groups of women quilting for a fee. For example, Ida Melugin Chambers of Atwood, Kansas, kept detailed diaries, which included references to quilting for a living after her husband died.

As fabric and styles changed in the 1920s, so did quilts. The new look was characterized by a multicolor palette, a good deal of plain white cotton, and appliqué was often chosen over piecing. These quilts suited the urban dwellers better than the darker, old fashioned quilts. This transition happened quickly -- between 1922 and 1927 pastels replaced the darker fabrics nationwide. Patterns filled with nostalgia, such as Grandmother's Flower Garden and Sunbonnet Sue, were developed and sold, including the popular patterns by Marie Webster. Her book *Quilts: Their Story and How to Make Them* was published in 1915 and is considered to be the first official quilt book. In addition, embroidered blocks became very popular in the 1920s, with new colorfast threads and the marketing of transfer patterns and stamped squares.

## THE QUILTING RENAISSANCE

The new quilting fad reached its peak from 1930-1936. Quilt patterns abounded in women's magazines, newspapers and from private designers. Despite the fact that the Kansas economy suffered from the stock market crash in 1929 and severe drought and dust storms forced many farmers into bankruptcy, the state moved into a position of leadership in quilt making.

Two Kansas newspapers, The Kansas City Star and Topeka's Cappers Weekly, published quilt patterns on a regular basis beginning in the late 1920s. The Kansas City Star also reached quilters in Arkansas, Iowa, Missouri and Oklahoma through a weekly farm paper, The Majority. The majority of patterns in both these publications were contributed by readers. The readers often re-named patterns to reflect Kansas and some readers, like Roberta Christy of Scott Oty, sent new patterns that they desired like the Kansas Beauty. These patterns can be found in the quilt scrapbooks of the era, as they were carefully saved for use later on.

There were also several Kansas-area publishing houses that focused on quilting. One was run from the home of Scioto Imhoff Danner in El Dorado, Kansas. Mrs. Danner's Quilt Books were published from 1932 to 1970, and she had a booming mail-order business. Two other influential quilt houses were Ruby Short McKim of Independence, Missouri, and the Aunt Martha Studios of Kansas City.

Of course, Kansas newspapers printed syndicated columns that introduced Kansas quilters to East Coast and Chicago quilters like Nancy Page, Laura Wheeler and Hope Winslow. Stores sold patterns for quilting and embroidered squares from a variety of companies. And many women would have subscribed to one or more of the myriad ladies magazines of the day.

Kansas women designed their own quilts, and two of the best known quilt designers of the 1930s hailed from Emporia, Kansas. Rose Good Kretsinger (1886-1963) had attended the Chicago Art Institute and not only designed prize winning quilts, but collaborated with Carrie A. Hall to write The Romance of the Patchwork Quilt in America in 1935, which brought her national recognition. Charlotte Jane Whitehill (1866-1964) was raised on her mother's quilts but did not begin quilting herself until 1929. She began by using fancy needlework quilt patterns and then developed her own designs based on heirloom quilts and museum pieces. Fourteen of the quilts are in the collection of the Denver Art Museum. While neither of these women actively marketed their patterns, they were used or influenced scads of Kansas women as far away as Topeka. These quilts can be seen as the precursors of the contemporary art quilt movement.

## CONTEMPORARY QUILTING

After a brief drop in interest right after World War II when America was obsessed with the modern, quilting has seen a steady interest since the late 1960s. Quilting groups or guilds, based on the earlier Protestant groups such as the Dorcas Circle and the traditional quilting bees, are designed to exchange ideas, help with quilting, provide social interaction, and often to commemorate significant events. But these groups, while participating in traditional quilting techniques, also contain innovative quilters. The American Quilt Society, the National Quilters Association and the Kansas Quilters Organization, each with an emphasis on quilt research and display, are just a few of the organizations that support contemporary quilters.

Although we think of quilting as conservative --a piece of our past --it should be noted that technology has always played a part in quilting, and that quilters have stayed "up with the times." Whether it was the adoption of the latest fabrics being produced, the use of the newly invented sewing machine, or the popularity of patterns and the use of mass media to communicate ideas, quilters were not stuck in the past, even when nostalgia influenced their patterns. It should come as no surprise that today's quilters are innovative and creative.

In 1978, the Quilt National was founded, and with it began the art quilt movement. Virginia Randles of Lawrence, Kansas, was instrumental in starting the organization and its exhibition program. Each of the biennial exhibitions has traveled to Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas, and the 10th Annual Quilt National is being hosted there this summer. This exhibition of the premier art quilts in the country illustrates aptly that while many quilters are still making cloth and batting sandwiches, their use of creative design and innovative techniques and materials is a bridge between traditional craft and fine art.