

## STEARNS & FOSTER

by Joyce Gross

Soon after George S. Stearns graduated from Andover College, he took the long journey to Cincinnati, Ohio to join his brother who had moved west in 1830 from the family home in Bedford, Mass. The young man started a printing business and then went into manufacturing printing ink.

Seth C. Foster came from Woolper Creek, Ky, in Boone County and when he arrived in Cincinnati, he turned to clerking in a grocery store.

The two met through their activities in the Congregational Church and became friends. When someone mentioned to Stearns that there was a need for a strong cotton batting that would neither tear nor stretch, he talked it over with his friend Foster and they decided to experiment.

They first tried putting paste on a marble slab, but the batting stuck to the slab. They continued to experiment -adding a little more water each time until the mixture was quite thin. Finally the batt would peel off. They hung it up to dry over a clothes line and decided they had a product which they would call "cotton wadding". Though quilters tend to claim batting for themselves, it was used for padding many articles such as horses' collars and buggy seats.

The first mill was established on Clay and Liberty Streets. Seth Foster invested \$1500 cash in the business and George Stearns put up an equivalent amount of tools and equipment. They set up their factory next to George's ink factory. That proved to be a mistake because the cotton dust mixed with the ink. The ink manufacturing had to come to a halt.

The dust from the cotton and the cotton itself were highly inflammable, and since the mill was lighted by gas and heated by stoves, fires frequently broke out. The mill was located in the heart of the residential area, so the fires and the fire engines, plus the dust from the cotton disturbed the neighbors.

A younger brother, Henry Stearns, was active in the firm between 1846-49, but the Gold Rush fever got him and he left for California with a steam laundry. He set up the first steam laundry in California, but did not find gold.

Originally the cotton batting was 32" or 36" wide so frequently it had to be pieced. Stearns & Foster invented a wider card so that it could be made in large sheets.

In 1871 Mr. Stearns' son Edwin came into the company and a few years later, Mr. Foster suggested he become a full partner. Edwin was so grateful to Mr. Foster that when he had a son, he named the boy after his benefactor. He is the fourth generation of his family to be active in the company.

In 1882 Stearns & Foster built a new mill in Lockland, a town about 10 miles north of Cincinnati on the Miami and Erie Canal. The canal was used to bring the cotton up from the South and take the product down to Cincinnati.

The oldest publication in the author's collection is dated 1931. That year the company published a two-sided sheet on "Judging the Quilt" and a catalog of patterns entitled QUILT PATTERNS OLD & NEW. The first batting wrapper in the collection has a notation under the pattern coupon "offer void after 1934". The colors are not as bright as a later wrapper copyrighted in 1939, but it has the familiar red, white and blue "Tumbling Blocks" borders and colored pictures of blocks. Other wrappers in the collection are copyrighted 1940, 1949, 1970, and 1976. The latter all have the full Lone Star with quilt blocks surrounding it. Now batting comes in a clear plastic bag which is probably much cleaner, but to the old timers, the product will forever be identified with the colorful paper wrapper.

On the inside of the paper wrapper was a pattern, instructions and a coupon, the

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*Evans Foster Stearns, Chairman of the Board of Stearns & Foster, is the 4th generation in his family to be active in the manufacture of quilt batts.*

*Mr. Stearns was drafted in WW II and sent to Arkansas. At the end of his basic training he was required to make a 30 mile march with a 60 lb pack on his back.*

*After he had hiked about 10 miles he started to tire, and after 25 miles the heel of his shoe fell off. It was very hot and he was pretty miserable. Just then he saw a small cabin with a wisp of smoke coming out of the chimney. They had just done the laundry and there was a quilt on the line. He recognized it immediately as The Lone Star, a Stearns & Foster Mountain Mist pattern. The sight of that familiar quilt pattern cheered him and the last miles were much easier.*



of  
 company does  
 ven fabrics, nor  
 connection with any  
 brand of cloth.

Take the samples to your Dry Goods or Department Store and you will surely find that both the colors and the quality can be matched in a color-fast and tub-fast fabric.

Stores that carry "Mountain Mist-The Perfect Filling for Quilts" usually specialize in Quilt Makers' Supplies of all kinds.

**THE STEARNS & FOSTER CO.**  
 Manufacturers of MOUNTAIN MIST Quilting Cotton  
 LOCKLAND, CINCINNATI, OHIO

On the inside of the paper wrapper was a pattern, instructions and a coupon, the form of which changed between 1933/34 and 1939. The coupon could be used to purchase additional patterns at a discount. The catalog in 1936 reads, "Mountain Mist patterns are not sold in stores. The production of these patterns is not a moneymaking venture but a service to the users of Mountain Mist cotton. Mountain Mist patterns provide quilt makers with designs that are better than ordinary at a moderate price. By offering them to our customers we hope to encourage more people to make more quilts." It lists 132 patterns available.

Two wrappers with copyright dates of 1939 and 1940 have small samples of fabric stapled beside the pattern and the note to the consumer, (These samples will) show the colors we suggest for this quilt. Take the samples to your Dry Goods or Department Store and you will surely find both the colors and quality can be matched in a color-fast and tub-fast product.

Many of the present generation of quiltmakers cannot understand the use of professional quilters but Stearns & Foster gave them a good deal of publicity.

In the 1935 MOUNTAIN MIST BLUE BOOK OF FAMOUS QUILT DESIGNS, Mrs. George D. Litsey, a "Prominent Kentucky Quilt Authority" and a Century of Progress Quilt Contest prize-

winner endorsed Mountain Mist quilting cotton. She wrote further, "Mrs. Blame Wilson of Travellers Rest, Kentucky who does the actual quilting of my tops for me, tells me that this filling is a great deal easier to use."

In 1938 Miss Margery M Taylor of Falmouth Fore-side, Portland, Maine wrote in the ALBUM OF MOUNTAIN MIST QUILT BLOCKS "I am a professional quilter doing some lovely work ... I have used (Mountain Mist) during the years I have been in the quilting business..."

In the same booklet, one full page is devoted to the professional quilter. "ATTENTION ...Professional Quilters. It is good business to put your name on your work and to let your customers know you have used the very best of materials. At the bottom of the page in somewhat smaller letters, "Attention... Mrs. Quiltmaker. When you send your quilt top to be quilted, be sure that it is filled with Mountain Mist Quilting Cotton - it is of the highest quality and texture...". A label is pictured which has a space for the name of the person who made the quilt top and a space for the name of the person that quilted it. One could obtain the labels by sending one three-cent stamp to cover postage and handling and enclosing one Mountain Mist Pattern Coupon for label. These labels are not mentioned in any other publications. Certainly to Stearns & Foster there was no stigma attached to using a professional quilter. Indeed, they did much to promote them.

In 1941 the catalog announces the QUILTER'S GUILD

**THE QUILTERS' GUILD**

- DO YOU WANT .....?
- To buy a quilt completely made by an expert?
- To have a quilt top pieced or appliqued ready for you to quilt nod finish?
- To have cloth pieces cut out so you may piece or applique the quilt top yourself?
- To have your quilt top marked with the quilting design ready for you to quilt it?
- To have your quilt-top quilted, bound and completed?

If you desire to have any of this work done for you, there is a member of The Quilters' Guild ready and anxious to please you. Just write The Quilters' Guild, enclosing a stamped envelope for the reply, and the name of a capable quilt crafter will be sent you.

The Mountain Mist Quilters' Guild has become the much needed medium between quilters and their customers. Its aim is to put you in touch with a professional quilt maker without cost to either of you. You make your own arrangements with the quilt maker as to design, quality of work and the cost.

**THE MOUNTAIN MIST QUILTERS' GUILD**  
 P. O. BOX 109  
 LOCKLAND OHIO

In the same year in HOW TO MAKE A QUILT under the quilting section the reader is advised "When it comes to quilting, do it or have it done by hand if possible ... If you do not know of a professional quilter in your locality, you may obtain the name of one by simply writing the Mountain Mist Quilters' Guild, Cincinnati 15, Ohio and enclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope. As late as 1971 a quiltmaker could still obtain a list of quilters in her area

In 1933 the company published a book entitled THE ROMANCE OF THE QUILT MAKING SALES. It was larger and more elaborate than the previous publications. Very large type was used in the first half of the book and pg. 1 announced, "Four Years ago in 1929, Mountain Mist Quilting Cotton was advertised for the first time. Quilt-making was largely confined to the farm home, the small town or those who had once lived on the farm or in the small town. Today quiltmaking has universal appeal ...to the farm woman, the small town woman... and to the apartment dweller in the large city as well

.There is no question about it... quiltmaking is of major interest to millions and millions of American women... quilt-making is highly profitable to any and every merchants who will help to promote it... Recent surveys show that at least 400 metropolitan newspapers are publishing quilt material regularly. A Gallup survey in six large cities show further that the quilt article is the most popular Sunday feature - 32% of the women reading it."

One page in the book promotes quilt shows, " A QUILT SHOW... That's the way to sell Mountain Mist and other quilt material. The company invites merchants who want "an increased sale of cotton batting and quilt materials" to write for free items including a book which would tell the merchant how to conduct a quilt show entitled THE QUILT SHOW, newspaper mats, folders, exhibit markers, filing cards and claim checks. The pages following have pictures of store quilt shows and excerpts from letters.

### 50,000 People Visited Show in Three Days

The Quilt Show conducted by the Detroit News is a practical example of the enthusiasm and interest which a Quilt Show develops. During the three days in which this show ran, November 17, 18, and 19, 1933, more than 50,000 people jammed the doors. Fifteen hundred quilts were exhibited. The reprint of the newspaper page shown here gives in idea of the crowds. Imagine what an event of that kind would do for the merchant who put it on.

The book discusses the company's past advertising schedule

Four years ago when Mountain Mist began advertising, only one magazine was used. The circulation was 1,217,619. Or, one out of every twenty-one women in the United States saw Mountain Mist Advertising.



Three years ago, two magazines were used. The total circulation of the two books was 2,251,937. Or, one out of every eleven women in the United States saw Mountain Mist National Advertising.\*



Two years ago, three magazines were used. The total circulation of these three magazines was 3,701,675. Or, one out of every seven women in the United States saw Mountain Mist Advertising.



Last year, four magazines were used. The total circulation of these four books was 5,632,016. Or, one out of every four women in the United States saw Mountain Mist Advertising.



*\*In the author's collection of NEEDLECRAFT no Mountain Mist ad could be found prior to Sept. 1931*

The companion book PRESENTING ... THE STORE QUILT SHOW (1933) would make most quilt lovers want to return to that era when department stores had wide aisles and lots of space to create displays of the quilts. Pictures of some of the quilt shows are on page 21. There are also sections in the book on "Hanging and Displaying", "Judging", "Prizes", "Catalogs", and other pertinent material



In October, 1949, the company sponsored the Central States Quilt Exhibition. 128 prize winning quilts from the 1949 state fairs in 10 central states were entered and exhibited. The ten states were Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky,

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Michigan, Missouri, Ohio, Tennessee and West Virginia. Among the winners were Mrs. Harry B. Morris of Indianapolis who won a first prize at the Indiana State Fair and a blue ribbon at the Exhibition, Mrs. O. W. Lynch of Nashville Tenn for her Poke berry quilt which won a second prize at the Tennessee State Fair and the Central States Exhibition, Mary Alice Struble of Columbus, Ohio who won a blue ribbon and a Best of Show at the Ohio State Fair and a special Blue Ribbon Trophy at the C.S.E. The catalog was entitled, The MOUNTAIN MIST BLUE BOOK OF PRIZE QUILTS.

Two of Bertha Stenge's quilts are pictured. American Holiday was a first prize winner at the Tennessee State Fair and won a Special Award from the C.S.E. Her Bible quilt was a first prize winner at the Tennessee State Fair. The catalog calls them both original design but the Bible quilt was a LADIES HOME JOURNAL pattern. (See: Fall 1979 QUILTERS' JOURNAL pg 13.)

The company has a large quilt collection and must have made a practice of commissioning a quilt as each pattern was published. Most of the patterns were developed in 1930-50 and the quilts reflect the times. The colors of the quilts are mostly greyed pastels. The workmanship and quilting is generally fine. Notable exceptions are several quilts made in the 1970's, a Lone Star made in the Appalachias and the Bed of Peonies one of several made in the same pattern. According to the company there was no record kept of any of the quiltmakers. The company's policy is to make these quilts available for loan to quilt shows and exhibits.

In 1974 the company geared up for the Bicentennial and began a series of very successful quilt block contests. As the winners of the contests were chosen, the blocks were made into quilts and added to the quilt collection. These quilts are also available for loan.

- 1974 - Thirteen Colonies
- 1975 - State Flowers
- 1976 - School Fays
- 1977 - Teen Fun
- 1978 - Famous Women
- 1979 - Nursery Rhymes
- 1980 - Mv favorite Hero

In 1977, the Stearns & Foster Co. and the Lockland Civic Association presented the entire Mountain Mist Collection of 130 quilts for the first time. It was a beautiful display and the quilts were hung full. Photographs were permitted and the company printed a list of the quilts and a catalog with sketches of the

quilts which could be purchased. The quilts were dated but one had the feeling that there was some questions about some of the dates.

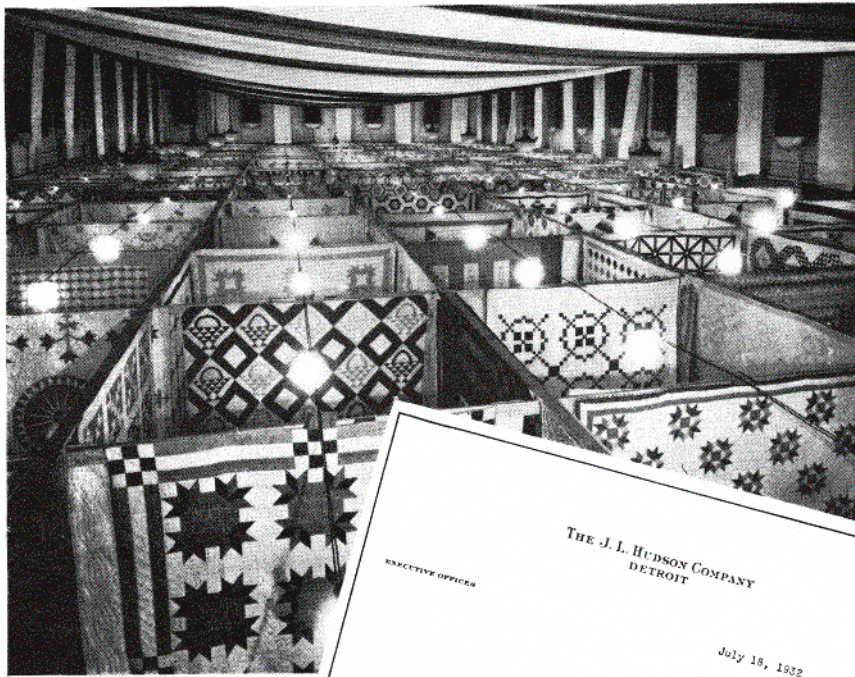
To the quilt historian the history of Stearns & Foster reflects the history of quilt-making in the United States and by examining the advertising and publicity of the company, one can understand more fully the quilt boom of the 1930s and 1940s.

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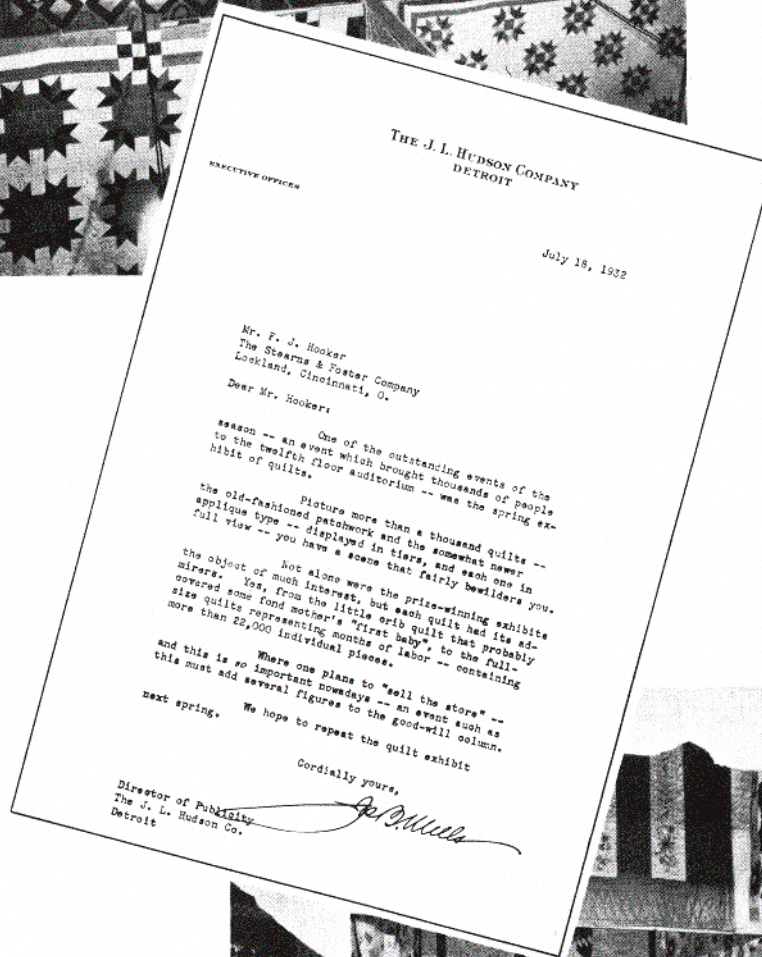
*All publications were published by Stearns & Foster Co, Cincinnati, Ohio unless otherwise noted.*

- JUDGING THE QUILT (1931)
- PRESENTING ... THE STORE QUILT SHOW (1932)
- THE ROMANCE OF QUILT MAKING SALES (1932)
- HOW TO MAKE A QUILT (1934)
- THE MOUNTAIN MIST BLUE BOOK OF FAMOUS QUILT DESIGNS (1935)
- THE MOUNTAIN MIST BLUE BOOK FOR 1938
- AN ALBUM OF MOUNTAIN MIST QUILT BLOCKS (1938)
- WHY NOT? MAKE THIS QUILT AN HEIRLOOM (1939)
- HOW TO MAKE COMFORTABLE COMFORTS (1942)
- HOW TO MAKE A QUILT (1943) *Not the same as 1934 publication.*
- PHOEBE EDWARDS SCRAP BOOK (1945)
- OUR CENTURY OF PROGRESS, 1846-1946 (1946)
- YOU'RE GOING TO MAKE A QUILT? (1947)
- MOUNTAIN MIST BLUE BOOK OF PRIZE QUILTS (1950)
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- DIRECTIONS FOR QUILT-MAKING BY HOME SEWING MACHINES (@1958, 1971 ed.)
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- HOW TO RAISE MONEY BY QUILTING (1968)
- DESIGNS FOR QUILTINGS (1970)
- ANYONE CAN QUILT (1975)
- STEARNS & FOSTER CATALOG OF QUILT PATTERNS AND NEEDLECRAFT SUPPLIES (1977)
- CATALOGS
- QUILT PATTERNS OLD & NEW (1931)
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- " " " " " (1941) Ed. #20
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- " " " " " (1968) Cat. #40
- " " " " " (1971) Cat. #41
- " " " " " (1973) Cat. #43



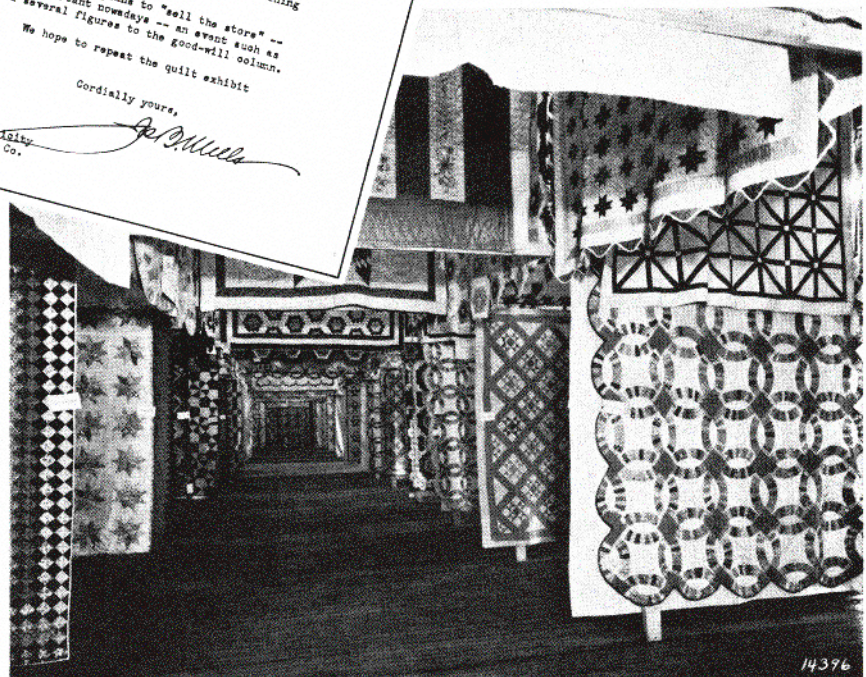


Part of Hudson's Display —  
From Above. The entrance  
and exit of each quadrangle  
of quilts are at the sides and  
the visitors passed from one  
quadrangle to the next.



Over 50,000 people visited  
the Hudson Store to admire  
the 1000 quilts exhibited!

From the Floor Level. This is  
a veritable labyrinth of lovely  
quilts. From this aisle the  
visitors entered the innumera-  
ble lines of quadrangles  
shown in the picture above.



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