

# QUILTERS' JOURNAL

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BERTHA STENGE poses at her quilt frame surrounded by some of her prize winning quilts. Mrs. Stenge liked to work on her quilts early in the morning from 6 a.m. to 9 a.m.

## BERTHA STENGE

*BERTHA SHERAM (SHERAMSKY) STENGE born Feb. 8, 1891 in Alameda, CA, died June 18, 1957 in Chicago, IL. Multi-prizewinning quilt maker. Married Bernard Stenge, attorney, in 1912. Three daughters, Frances, Ruth and Prudence. Attended Longfellow and Alameda High Schools. First prize winner 1939-40 New York World's Fair, Grand Prize winner WOMAN'S DAY National NEEDLEWORK EXHIBITION. Exhibits of her quilts, University of California Art Gallery, Berkeley, 1941; Folk Arts Centers, NYC, 1943; and Art Institute of Chicago, 1943.*

In the 1940's and 1950's, Bertha Stenge was a name well known to quilters and quilt lovers. She had won 1st prize at the New York World's Fair, the Grand National Prize at the WOMAN'S DAY National Needlework Exhibition, had her quilts displayed on both sides of the nation, been interviewed on radio and in the newspapers, won scores of blue ribbons in county and state fairs and her designs and patterns were carried in leading magazines such as WOMAN'S DAY and LADIES' HOME JOURNAL.

As a result total strangers from all walks of life wrote to her asking for her patterns or offering to exchange patterns. She kept their letters and notes filed by the city or state in which they lived. Sometimes they told her of unsympathetic or disinterested husbands or their health. Sometimes they wrote about their latest quilt.

She also exchanged letters with many of the great names in quilting. Marie Webster wrote to her in 1943,

"When I moved here (Princeton, N.J.) four years ago I left my quilt interests in Marion with the Practical Patchwork Company 110 South Race Street, Marion, Indiana. They use my designs for stamping quilts and can arrange for quilting".

Mrs. Webster thought it necessary to add after her name, "author of Quilts and Their Makers, etc."

Carrie Hall and Mrs. Stenge met through another correspondent and exchanged several letters. Mrs. Stenge evidently wanted to have a doll repaired.

Elizabeth Wells Robertson, Director of Art, Chicago Board of Education was given permission by WOMAN'S DAY to use their photograph of Bertha's "Victory Quilt" for her forthcoming book AMERICAN QUILTS. She

wrote to Mrs. Stenge asking her to

"to jot down on paper a little story about how you happened to make your first quilt -what was your first quilt? What prizes did you win with it? What was your second quilt? What prizes did you win with it?"

She asked permission to come to see her and talk over pictures, adding "I am now on my last chapter.," The book when published in 1948 carried a picture of the Lotus Flowers quilt.

In a letter from Florence Peto dated May 5, 1957, is a lengthy description of a recent purchase by Mrs. Peto.

"A perfectly handsome and very rare American historical fabric - one that is called: The Seven Presidents. It is blue on white and a nice greenish-blue - a little lighter than turquoise. It was printed to honor Andrew Jackson. The design is a series of ovals or vignettes of the Presidents beginning with Washington. Then in the repeats there is the Constitution and the American Eagle, - each oval contains the name of the president and dates in which he served. Jackson's says: 1829 - the blank indicates he had not died yet or served the second term which I think he did... (It is) a whole counterpane top of three and one half widths and three yards long... 1 paid \$500."

Another letter from Mrs. Peto indicates that they had a full and lengthy correspondence often writing once a week. She wrote to Mrs. Stenge's daughter Francis Traynor at the time of her mother's death.

"I was interesting your mother in ancient fabrics and their beauty - she even used some in her recent work. I know she intended to make a whole quilt of antique materials, like the last one I made that took blue ribbon in Ky State Fair."



A news release from the New York World's Fair of 1940 dated August 16, announced Bertha Stenge as the top prize winner in the "America through the Needle's Eye" contest.

The contest was conducted locally throughout the country by department stores. Entries covered two general classes (1) new work completed especially for entry in the contest and (2) old work previously completed. Mrs. Stenge had entered her Palm Leaf quilt in the "old work" division.

On September 14, Olive Lyford, Coordinator of Art Exhibits wrote to her that the quilt had again been presented with a prize. This time for one half of the Popular Prize. She won \$500.00 for National Prize and an additional \$125 for her half of the Popular Prize.

Mrs. Lyford also comments

"It was very good of you to forward the Bible Quilt for us to see and (we) were very much interested in it. (We) felt that the craftsmanship and creative design for which you have such a talent, were unique and extraordinarily fine."

In 1941 Bertha Stenge entered her quilt in the Canadian National Exposition and received first prize and later a letter from the woman who had tallied her score,

"Mrs. Stenge I am about to start and make a quilt for myself, but before I do start I would like to have the pleasure of seeing your quilt. I (work during the day) so I would like to make this visit some evening if it is so pleasing to you."

On Apr. 16, 1941 Professor Eugen Neuhaus, head of the Art Dept. at the University of California in Berkeley, wrote

"Dear Mrs. Stenge, Many thanks for your letter of the third with the photos - reminders of a pleasant Sunday at Chicago. In the meantime I have talked with my colleagues about your quilts and the idea of giving an exhibition of them here sometime this coming fall... Every one is very interested and anxious to have an exhibition which might be planned for three weeks in Oct."

On May 15, Mr. Neuhaus wrote again

"Dear Mrs. Stenge, Many thanks for your letter of April 19th. I am counting definitely on you for a show of your quilts during the month of November in our University Art Gallery. To make a good showing it would require thirteen quilts, one for each panel."

Oct. 11, another letter

"Dear Mrs. Stenge, I have your letter of October 3. After some necessary changes in our exhibition program it appears that the Quilts will go on exhibition on November 15 to December 1st. We will be glad

to carry the insurance... Five thousand dollars seems to me not too much, for thirteen quilts that would mean \$300 dollars for each quilt.

Oct. 22, 1941

"Dear Mrs. Stenge, Many thanks for your letter (airmail) of Oct. 17th... As to the choice of quilts, I should like to leave this entirely to you. We can hang thirteen, since we have that many individual panels to each accommodate one quilt... I look forward to your show and I know it will prove of great interest to everybody."

Nov. 4, 1941 he wrote

"Dear Mrs. Stenge, Our original understanding to exhibit your Quilts in our University Art Gallery during the month of November has been interfered with by so many unforeseen factors that we better postpone the idea to next term..."

Nov. 5, 1941

"Dear Mrs. Stenge, The Quilts have arrived and I shall take good care of them. Since yesterday when I telephoned you, things have changed, that is to say... the Quilts will go on exhibition next Monday the 9th until December 1st."

After the exhibit was over he wrote on Dec. 10, 1941

"Dear Mrs. Stenge, I want to thank you for loaning us the Quilts and I hope that some day they may be seen at the San Francisco Museum of Art... With the best wishes of the Season to all your family, Sincerely Eugen Neuhaus"

Articles about the exhibition appeared in most of the local papers. The Alameda TIMES-STAR wrote "Mrs. Stenge's hobby has produced a collection of 13 exceptional quilts and Professor Eugen Neuhaus, head of the fine arts department at the University of California and at one time her art tutor, invited her to exhibit at the art gallery in Berkeley"

The Oakland POST-ENQUIRER wrote "An unusual exhibit of fine, artistic work in quilting is now being displayed at the Univ. of Calif. art gallery, featuring the work of Mrs. Bernard Stenge of Chicago."

In Apr. 1941 WOMAN'S DAY started a new series of articles on Needlework entitled "American Design Series", written by Rose Wilder Lane. An announcement was also made that a Nat'l Needlework Exhibition would be held the following year with a \$1,000 as the highest award.

In Aug. 1942 WD announced the Nat'l Needlework Exhibition to be held Oct. 26-31 at the Women's Int'l Exposition of Arts & Industries, Grand Central Palace, NYC. To be eligible, needlework must have won a WD

Sweepstakes Prize at state or county fairs. A list of fairs followed with a special note at the bottom of the page that readers in Ark., Calif., Conn., Fla., Iowa., Minn., R.I., S.C., Tenn., Tex., and Wash., would have special competitions with Sweepstake prizes similar to those awarded at the fairs, Fairs were being cancelled because of war conditions and it was suggested that if the fair in the reader's state had been cancelled, or if they lived in one of the eleven states listed, they should write to WD.

Bertha's state fair was listed at Springfield, Ill., Aug. 14-23. On Aug. 18, 1942 WD sent a postcard to her (evidently in response to her query) that the Williamson County Fair in Marion was accepting needlework entries from contestants in Illinois.

The two quilts that won 1st & 3rd place in the applique classification and WD sweepstakes at the Williamson County Fair were accepted for the Nat'l Needlework Exhibition. WD sent Mrs. Stenge receipts for the two quilts dated Sept. 28 and valued at \$100.00 each. The dates and place were changed to Nov. 19-24 and Madison Square Garden.

In July WD launched a new series entitled "Today's American Needlework".

On Nov. 10, Marguerite Kohl, Needlework Exhibition Editor wrote to Mrs. Stenge

"Earlier in the day we sent you a telegram of congratulations on winning the \$1000 Grand Award in our National Needlework Competition as well as \$125 in additional prizes; this letter is to be another expression of congratulation and an invitation to come to New York as our guest at the Exhibition. The Exhibition opens Thursday, Nov. 19, and if it is convenient for you, we thought you might plan to arrive on the opening day, stay for the awarding of the prizes on Friday and either return to Chicago Saturday or stay with us longer as you wish. All expenses will of course be paid by Woman's Day."

Mr. and Mrs. Stenge did go to New York where she was presented with a bouquet of yellow roses and her other prizes. The event was held in the auditorium of Madison Square Garden and it was standing room only for the ceremony which was broadcast by Mary Margaret McBride and carried over NBC.

The exhibition itself was spectacular and Marguerite Kohl wrote to Bertha on Dec. 1

"I wish that there were some way I could have recorded for you the comments made by awed men and women as they stood looking at your Victory Quilt... Many came back again and again as they felt they could not possible see and appreciate it all the first time.

They marveled at the workmanship, at your use of color and of course, at the appropriate and interesting design. It made me very happy to know that people attending our Exhibition were as much in accord with the decision of the judges as the magazine.

Your quilt is so lovely that we would like to reproduce it in full color in our magazine as the feature of the first article in our new series on 'Prize Winning Needlework.' As you know, we offer a leaflet of instruction for making the pieces shown in each article and I wonder if we may have your permission to reproduce your quilt and include directions for making it in our service leaflet."

In Feb., WD listed all 36 winners of the contest, reviewed the Award Ceremony and ran colored pictures of the Exhibition.

Jan. 18, 1943 brought another letter from Marguerite Kohl

"We know how busy you are being kept in replying to admirers about your Victory Quilt because of the number that have written this office about it. The color picture of the quilt turned out beautifully as you will see yourself in the March issue... The picture taken at the Exhibition of your quilt will be shown in the February issue but the applique article which offers the pattern is not available until March."

Feb. 8, 1943 Mrs. Kohl wrote

"We have not as yet returned your quilt (#711) because of the many problems which come up in photographing needlework. We had difficulty in getting the specialized equipment necessary in this type of photography and therefore have been delayed in the servicing of the designs. This quilt will be featured in the "Quilting" article in the May 1943 issue of the magazine."

On Feb. 17, 1943 the magazine assured Mrs. Stenge that her "Peace" quilt (711) was being returned to her by Railway Express.

In the Mar. issue which was the beginning of the new series on "Prize Winning Needlework" the Victory quilt was pictured in full color on a bed. The caption read

Mrs. Bertha Stenge, of Chicago, Illinois, combined patriotism with good design and workmanship to make an appliqué quilt which reflects the historic events of our day just as clearly as Colonial needlewomen caught the spirit of revolutionary times. Using colors several shades lighter than flag red and blue, Mrs. Stenge appliquéd an eagle, a shield and state stars on a white background. You can reproduce the double-size quilt in cotton materials for about \$6.00.

In May the magazine published the article on "Quilting", the third in the series. The quilt that Bertha had won third prize in the quilting classification was pictured in detail only, with no mention of the name of the quilt.

Following the WD Exhibition, the Folk Art Center in New York requested the loan of the prize winning Victory Quilt. They scheduled a two part exhibition of "Masterpieces of Early American Folk Arts."

ANTIQUES Magazine, Mar 1943, announced it as follows: "The Folk Arts Center, 670 Fifth Ave. NYC, has opened its 15th annual exhibition which will continue through March. It is divided into two parts. Half of it consists of items from the fine collection of old bedspreads owned by Mrs. Fulton Lewis of Washington, D.C.... in conjunction with old examples of old art, the gallery is showing for the first time examples of contemporary household art", including Bertha Stenge's prize quilt from the Woman's Day contest.

Mrs. Stenge was generous with her time and her quilts. There is no doubt that she and her husband received a great deal of pleasure from sharing her quilts with others. There are many letters and notes from admirers who had been a guest in her home for an impromptu "quilt show" thanking her for her hospitality and asking to be remembered to her "delightful husband and charming daughters". There are also letters from several magazines thanking her for sending her quilts for them to see.

On March 16, 1943, Mildred Davison from the Textile Division of the Decorative Arts Dept. at the Art Institute of Chicago wrote a letter "My dear Mr. Stenge, I am writing to ask if you will come in at your convenience to discuss the details of the proposed exhibition of Mrs. Stenge's quilts."

The exhibition was arranged for the summer of 1943. Seventeen quilts were exhibited and they are listed in the receipt from the Art Institute

#### QUILTS

1. Rachel's Wreath
2. Iva's Pincusion
3. Tiger Lily
4. Bible Quilt
5. Ruth's Ring
6. Victory Quilt
7. Quilt Show
8. Peace
9. Chicago Fair
10. Scrap Book
11. Palm Leaf
12. Saturnia Souvenir
13. Star of Constantine
14. Gazelle
15. Feathered Star
16. Lotus
17. San Francisco Fair

*The collection of my quilts  
Will remain on exhibition.  
At the Chicago Art Institute  
South Michigan and Adams  
Until October, 1943.  
The quilts are being shown  
In the Textile Galleries.  
I sincerely hope your visit  
To our Art Institute  
Will be a pleasant one.  
Cordially yours,*

*Bertha Stenge*

NEWSWEEK covered the exhibit in their Aug. 2, 1943 issue, Mrs. Stenge was evidently displeased with some inaccuracies in the report and complained to the magazine. The letter in reply was written by Hilda Loveman, Art Editor, on Aug. 6. She wrote "Frankly, I don't quite understand why you were so offended by the article "Quilts as Art" tho I do agree it wasn't a particularly good story," She then explains that the U.P. correspondent sent out some very bad material and the Art Institute had failed to reply to a telegram

Judging from the letters and notes Mrs. Stenge received about the exhibition it must have been a great success.

On Oct. 6, Mildred Davison wrote again to tell her that the quilts were to be returned to her on Friday and to thank her again for the loan which "made one of the most popular exhibitions the Decorative Arts Dept. has ever shown."

In 1971 when some of her superb quilts were to be sold, a full page color picture of the Bible Quilt and another page of information about "Bertha Stenge - the Queen of Chicago's Quilters" appeared. Articles also appeared in the QUILTERS NEWSLETTER and the NIMBLE NEEDLE TREASURES, Some of the quilts were sold and unfortunately no record was kept as to whom they were sold.

Bertha Stenge died June 18, 1957 after a brief illness and hospital stay. Florence Peto wrote to Francis Traynor, Bertha's daughter

"I am broken hearted and deeply shocked at your news. I had no idea your mother was gravely ill ... Our mutual interest in quilts and sewing brought us together in the first place and then after her visit to me I was very fond of your mother. We had a fine time together and I was looking forward to another get-together this September. The world has lost a magnificent needlewoman; there isn't another with the skill and ingenuity she displayed."

*I am extremely grateful to Francis Traynor, Bertha Stenge's daughter, who made her mother's correspondence file from 1939-1957 available to me for study. In addition I would like to thank Prudence Fuchsman, Bertha Stenge's daughter, Sally Garoutte, and Cuesta Benberry for the information they made available to me.*

JOYCE GROSS

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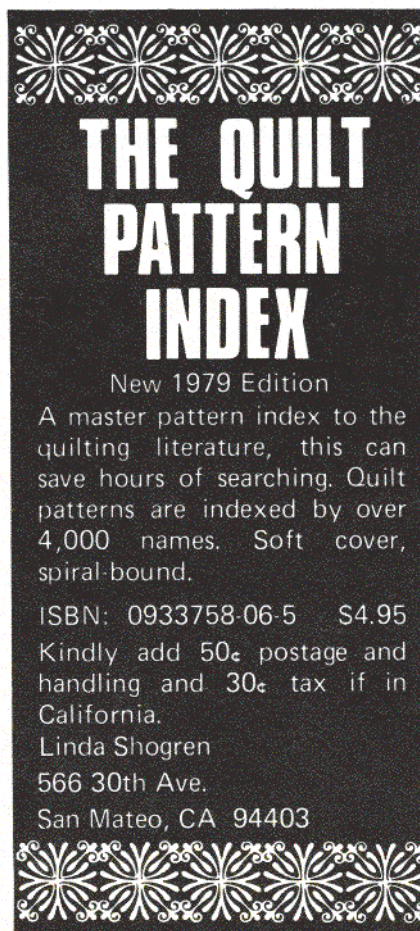
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*We are very grateful to Cuesta Benberry of St. Louis, MO for the Bibliography*



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EXCERPTS FROM QUILTER'S NOTES TO BERTHA STENGE

The following are excerpts from correspondence to Bertha Stenge:

FROM MRS. IVA LEHMAN, FORAKER, INDIANA

Feb. 3, 1937, "Am I too late with my quilt? I put in some long hours on it. But do people admire it? So many say it is the prettiest thing they ever saw, and really I think so myself. You did wonderful work on it in every way and I certainly will be surprised if it does not take a lot of prizes.

There is no need of me telling you that I disobeyed you in one of your suggestions for you'll find it yourself .... Please tell me what you think about that and also about the prices I am asking - 25 dollars. And I should be telling a--story to say I'm sorry."

Sept. 23, 1940, "It certainly must seem to you that I have flown to another planet.. For a long time we worked 10 hours a day at the dress factory and by the time I drove, and still do, 30 miles a day I was fit for nothing else."

Feb. 29, 1939, "Your most remarkable quilt is nearly finished... In my estimation the blue is the right thing for the edge."

\* \* \* \* \*

FROM MRS. MAUD SIELBECK, KARNAK, ILLINOIS

Mar. 28, 1940, "In the past 15 years since I have been doing this work, have never been without work... I enjoy my work very much. I do try to take 10 & 11 stitches to the inch."

Oct. 8 1940, I keep on hand white long cloth @ .15 per yd. for lining. The best grade of china cotton and white thread. My price \$1.50 per 100 yd. spool."

Mar. 22, 1941, "I will be able to do your quilt about the last of April... I can furnish the very best grade of china cotton, white long cloth lining and white thread

Oct. 10, 1941, ..."I was so excited when I received the 2nd National Prize on mine... You asked about the prices on making tops. 'Tis hard to say, as it depends entirely on the amount of work to be done.

Pieced tops usually run from 3 1/2 to 5 dollars. Appliqued from 5 to 15 according to the work. And as you know some are much more tedious and slower to do than others I do enjoy the work very much."

June 6, 1942, ..."The quilt came today in perfect condition. And I must say it truly is a marvelous quilt. As to the binding, it seems to me the piping will show much better if put next to the white, instead of binding with red or blue. Just put the piping between the two edges of top and lining... The Oak leaves surely look nice and I like the eagle and bell so much. I'll do my best to design the quilting to make it all show up well."

Jan 29, (no year noted) "Rec'd the quilt yesterday. It is certainly beautiful,... I expect to complete the 'Persian Flower' Garden next week. Of course I have not had time as yet to plan any quilting for the "Quilt Show" but will do my best to make it look well."

\* \* \* \* \*

ON JAN 24, 1942, MRS. W. P. ABSHEAR OF BOONEVILLE, KY. WROTE "I sure was glad to hear from you... Yes I can quilt 9 stitches in a inch if quilt isn't too thick. We all quilt as fine and nice as we can... I hope you can help me to get a good place that pays well. I used to get \$12.00 and \$15.00 for real close work but just what ever is right. I can get nice quilters here if I can get a good place.... There is woman here begging for quilting."

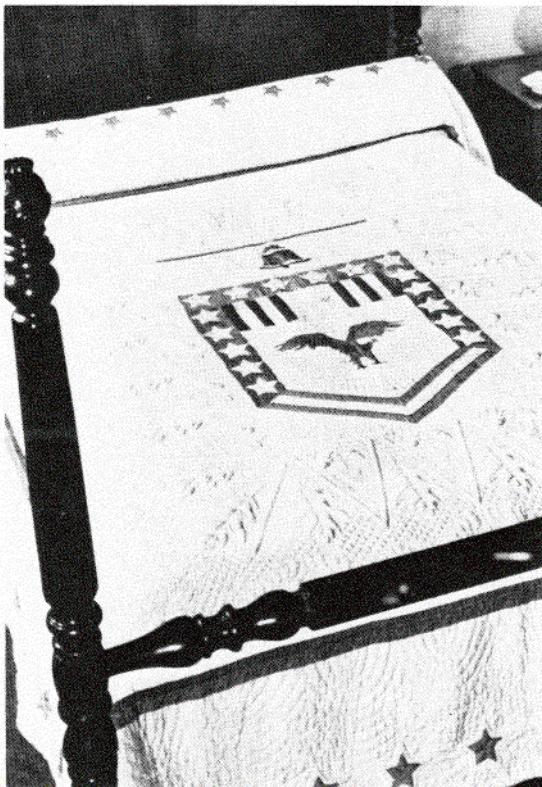
MRS. NAOMI JENNINGS OF HERRICK, ILL. ON APRIL 14, 1943 WROTE "I've been very slow in ans. your card but have been very busy with quilts... Yes I can quilt 10 stitches per in but haven't for some time as ladies prefer 8 instead as 10 is almost no stitch at all and when the quilt begins to get old such a few threads break out so much quicker and the most I do is for home use and has to be washed and they want them quilted to last the longest... not for shows... So far I have only charged 1¢ per yd of thread used furnished with the quilt for quilting that (is) the plain quilting not the padded or stuffed designs however the quilters around here are talking of raising their prices."



1.



2.



3.

1) Bertha Stenge, grand prize winner of the WOMAN'S DAY NATIONAL NEEDLEWORK CONTEST stands in front of her Victory quilt with its blue 1st prize in applique ribbon and its gold grand prize ribbon. 2) View of the National Needlework Exhibition held in Madison Square Garden in New York City, Nov. 19-24, 1942. 3) Victory Quilt. Instructions from the Home Service Dept., WOMAN'S DAY called for 14 yds for top and lining, 7 yds of flannel for interlining, 2 yds of blue, 12 yd of red.