



Plain View School, Clark Missouri

*Photo courtesy
Bettina Havig*

Some current literature directed at Amish quilts suggests that the traditions have faded and that quilts made since 1940 harbor too many English influences. Several years ago curiosity compelled me to ask the question; "are Amish quilts vastly different in 1980 from those of 1940 and before? Are some Amish patterns peculiar to Pennsylvania while some are designated Ohio or Indiana? Are some colors forbidden to the quilter's palette?"

The questions were explored through oral tradition within the several "church" groups clustered in the nearby community. By interviewing Amish quiltmakers and whenever possible photographing Amish quilts several postulates were derived.

Amish quiltmakers are above all practical. Wasted fabric and time are almost sinful. Those designs most common in Amish quilts attributed to Pennsylvania were bold and graphic. Many observers try to credit a great sense of aesthetics. It can not be denied that the quilts are remarkable optically, however, the overriding motivation is more practical.

In Pennsylvania the Amish have the oldest communities, the strongest economic structure and have always enjoyed the closest proximity to resources of all description. Not the least was fabric resources from which family garments were constructed. Scraps were in turn used for quilt construction. However, scraps were not always relied upon when new fabric was accessible.

As stewards of time, quick construction and simple design were premium. Designs like "Amish Diamond", "Amish Square in Square" and "Amish Bars" provided for rapid machine construction (by treadle) and virtually no loss due to waste in cutting. The tops could be quickly readied for the frame and artistic energy channeled into designing the quilting and thus imparting the rich texture of stitching so admired in the Amish quilts.

These bold Amish designs frequently had a single or double border of fabric framing the central design. Many Amish quilts are

A Dominion of Quilts

The Amish Quiltmaker's World
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Imagine another time, another place, a transported you. Imagine that within a scant half-hour of your bustling, fast paced world there is a gentle haven of lost time. You may now have succeeded in slipping through a time warp. A time warp marked by a set of quiet railway tracks. As they are transversed the 1980s dim in the rear view mirror and the mundane sight of electric and telephone lines are no more.

Here in this quiet countryside resides a thriving community of Amish farm families. They are resourceful and self sufficient. Families are large, sometimes a dozen or more children, and the farms are fruitful. While Amish women are a far cry from the liberated woman of this decade they are independent, talents and assets to their families. Many supplement the income of the farm by doing custom quilting for "English" women from town. More importantly they have honed their quilting skills, shared their patterns and make quilts for their own homes. It is these quilts, made to answer for the necessity of harsh winters and cold mornings, that have captured the eye of quilt fanciers across the country.

bordered by a narrow first border, sometimes pieced of squares or triangles and finally framed with a wider second border. The second border is usually at least twice the width of the first. Corners of Amish quilts are rarely mitered. Mitering corners requires greater yardage with no real wear or design contribution. It bears repeating that Amish quiltmakers are motivated by practical considerations.

"Plain" quilts -- so called because they are just plain fabric on each face, were safe for Amish women in any church group. They might often reflect respect for very conservative points of view fostered by the group's bishop. Traditionally Amish quilts are constructed of solid color fabric, shunning the prints which are considered too worldly. In still more conservative spheres even some pieced patterns are avoided. This simple form of design quite naturally fostered quilting as the artistic release.

The elegant quilting on Amish quilts is an important factor in our appreciation of these quilts. The designs are true to the basic precepts and are often quite simple to create. Several designs figure most prominently in the marking. Feather and cable design are almost imperative. They appear complicated and difficult but are feather or cable shape by skilled and practiced quilters. You find no printed patterns tucked away and always demanding a rigid 10-inch square. The designs are made to fit the space. Variations of relatively few quilting designs include fiddle-head, baskets (cable), pumpkin seed and saucer designs. They are all created from simple templates and marked as work progresses. Time not spent on intricate piecing is lavished on the quilting design. It takes some time for marking but actual time quilting is not necessarily more than if straight line quilting followed an overall grid.

Pieced patterns are popular with Amish quilters for many of the same reasons all quilters enjoy them. Primarily they consume scraps of fabric. Relatively few pieced patterns have gained popular use with Amish quiltmakers. Scrutiny of these quilts will reveal a common thread. They are simple uncluttered designs which utilize one or two main template shapes. Ocean Waves, Double Wedding Ring, Nine-Patch, Four-Patch and Baby Blocks are single template designs.

They require repeated cutting of fabric pieces into a single shape, for example, Ocean waves is arranged of right triangles. Days or weeks of cutting and piecing at odd moments finally culminate in setting the quilt with squares to unite the pieced sections of triangles.

Examination of several quilts made by quiltmakers of a particular family may reveal that all quilts with triangle pieces have the same template. Each quilter resorting to a different configuration for the template and providing an opportunity to cut scraps into that shape almost without regard to their final use. Regional variations and differences in popularity exist but the theme is constant. They are practical and simple. There is no justification to indulging in show-off exercises choosing more and more complex piecing.

The Amish quiltmakers cultivate quilts like a crop. The simple methods prevail. By adhering to simple designs they have been able to unleash their energy on color interaction and on quilting to add dimension and depth to the graphic designs.

Quilts have changed for all quiltmakers. Amish quilts are changed less for the time reference than "English" quilts. The changes in fabric and color are imposed on them from the outside world. New processes for manufacture and dying changed the palette. In most aspects old ways are their ways. Piecing, as always is primarily done hand. Amish quilts made for Amish home have the integrity of the past especially in Old Order Amish communities insulated from the prying eye of the tourist.

Amish quilts for Amish homes are basically unchanged. Perhaps it's time for the quilt world to take a fresh look at these quilts of the seventies and eighty's because they are important contribution.

Several years have lapsed since the first curious inquiries. The conclusion was then and has been reinforced that the date 1940 is a convenient one for collectors and dealers but it reflects no important transition for the Amish. It is unfair to package the quilts in this rigid time frame. Fabrics, batts and threads have changed for all of us. Let's not indict Amish quiltmakers for enjoying the changes and improvements in resources.

