

CUESTA BENBERRY: Part II

as told to Joyce Gross

Cuesta Benberry, noted historian, lecturer and author was the subject of JOURNAL #23 feature article. These articles are from a taped interview with, Mrs Benberry in 3/83

SIGNIFICANT MILESTONES FOR QUILTERS

I think the publication of the LADIES ART CATALOG in the late 1800s was sort of earthshaking. It was the first time one publication offered to the public a catalog with at least 300 patterns at a reasonable price with names assigned to them. The majority were pieced. They were not original patterns but rather patterns in use at that time compiled or gathered from other periodicals and almanacs.

The company claimed that by the 1920s their mail order business employed 50 people. They didn't sell just quilt patterns but that was their main offering. There were undoubtedly other companies who may have sold patterns into a limited area but Ladies Art from the beginning must have intended to go national since they ran ads for their catalog in the GOOD HOUSEKEEPING magazine.

Mountain Mist, (the parent company was Stearns & Foster) is important because they have probably been the prime source for pattern dissemination in the 20th century. Of course some later, or even earlier companies, stuck a pattern into the quilt batts. But MM, beginning I think in 1929, started publishing the pattern on the inside of the batting cover and then they relatively soon collected a variety of patterns to publish. (see JOURNAL Winter '81 for additional information). That has been a great influence in the selection of patterns used on quilts in the 20th century.

In studying the company, I found that their early batting did not always carry the Stearns and Foster name. They sent out the batting and each store that sold the batting was allowed to use its own name as though it were their own product. Standardization came in the 20s when MM sent out the batting under their own name.

S & F pattern publications are the source of some mystery to me. According to the information available to me at the present time*, the quilt pattern publications part

** I feel it is important not to make positive or dogmatic statements when one doesn't have all the original source information. I try to qualify my statements with, "Judging by the material I have at hand" which allows me the opportunity to modify my statement or change my mind.*

of MM came in the late 20s. Now that may not be true. I think the first catalog was published in 1931.

Note: Company files are not always complete. When your editor went to the Stearns & Foster company headquarters in 1976 to research an article, she found many of the pamphlets, catalogs and other publications in her collection were not in the company files. She provided the company with the missing materials.

The publication of the patterns had a great influence in the selection of patterns used on quilts in the 20th century, e.g., "N Y Beauty" has just assumed the name that MM gave it in the 30s. Previously the pattern was known as "Crown of Thorns" or "Rocky Mt Rose" but today it is almost universally called "N Y Beauty" - even a lot of learned journals use that name. In fact, one seldom hears the original name and I think it is due to the influence of those MM patterns.

It seems too bad that MM hasn't continued to offer new patterns but they have sort of stabilized their list at approximately 130. Those 130 have become classics and they are patterns pretty well recognized by people who are interested in quilts and who have some knowledge of patterns. The MM patterns are classics ... that's what fascinates me.

I am not sure the person the company designated as "Phoebe Edwards" who was supposed to have done the patterns ever intended them to be thought of as her original designs. I think they just adapted patterns from quilts they saw and probably patterns of other people such as Marie Webster which had proved popular. I don't think they claimed originality.

Other significant milestones were Marie Webster's QUILTS: THEIR STORY AND HOW TO MAKE THEM, (in 1920) and Ruth Finley's OLD PATCHWORK QUILTS and THE WOMEN WHO MADE THEM (in 1929).

I think that a series that came out in LADIES HOME JOURNAL in the period 1909-1915 which presented Elizabeth Daingerfield and Marie Webster was a milestone because it really caused quilts to be looked at in a new light. The series were full page features in a popular women's magazine. The LHJ held a respected position in the publication world which was rather unique. It was a popular magazine and a fine magazine. Marie Webster was catapulted into fame because of her participation.

Elizabeth Daingerfield,* who seemed not to have been a quilt or even a needlework person, also participated in the series. She apparently was a folklorist or maybe an ethnologist. I later found an article by her in a scientific journal. She made forays into Appalachia and encountered quilts made by these people which she reported with pictures in those early issues of LHJ. The articles were written in the folk lore manner.

In the depression period, the advent of the newspaper or syndicated quilt patterns really helped to popularize quilts. Everyone could see and get new patterns. I think each one of these so called "quilt revivals" has its own configuration. I think the 30s was to acquaint the public with the large number of available quilt patterns. The earlier one which came at the first part of the century was to reorient the people back to the beauty of the patchwork quilt and give it a new place after the crazy quilt craze. That was also the beginning of the museum acquisitions, such as the Art Institute of Chicago. I believe the first quilt acquisition by the Art Institute was in 1916. The Toledo Museum had an exhibit in 1918 or 1919.

In 1941-42 WOMAN'S DAY sponsored a National Needlework Contest in New York City. All the pieces in N Y had won a preliminary prize in their home state. The climax was an exhibit at the Woman's International Exposition at Madison Square Garden. The awards ceremony was broadcast over NBC by Mary Margaret McBride, well-known radio personality.

Prizes were awarded in categories such as crocheting, knitting, applique, patchwork, quilting, outline, embroidery, etc and at the conclusion of the contest, WD published pages of prize winners and interesting entries in a series of articles over a period of a year. Those articles have become collector's items.

But war had been declared ... there was a shortage of cloth and women were full force into defense work. America had other things than quilts on their minds. People were more interested in getting shoes for their feet and ration stamps for their sugar. Interest in quilts and quilting which had reached "revival" proportions in the 30s, declined.

Fewer publications carried quilts in the 40s and 50s although there were some important quilt figures and some very important quilts being made. Florence Peto, Bertha

Stenge, Rose Kretsinger, Charlotte Jane Whitehill and many others kept the quilt tradition alive and built on our heritage. But for Americans as a whole there was little to observe.

Jonathon Holstein and Gail van der Hoof were important figures in the 70s. There had been quilt shows before their exhibit at the Whitney Museum but with much less publicity. The "Pieced Quilt" hung in major museums in America and abroad and many people believe it touched off the current quilt "revival".

The Holsteins were able to bring the outside world into the quilt world because they had access to famous and important people. Major newspaper dailies such as the N Y TIMES and the WASHINGTON POST carried stories about the show which motivated the general public into an interest in quilts. That is what made this "revival" different.

QUILTER'S NEWSLETTER has been a unifying force for quilts and quiltmakers in the 70s and 80s. It did what the little quilt magazines in the 50s and 60s did but on a much larger scale. It coalesced the quilt community and made it a source to be reckoned with. If Holstein's show, as many people believe, generated great interest, I believe QN was the major force in building a receptive audience for the quilt exhibit and the subsequent books, patterns and related items that were being published and manufactured.

Certainly the proliferation of quilt guilds and associations which in turn led to the numerous symposia, quilt shows and other quilt events is different than in any other "revival". Quilting seems to be on a solid foundation this time.

Ecology thinking of the early 70s was also important. I think that made people turn to old material and skills. This thing about being self sufficient required you know how to do things yourself. You got a new interest in making things. All that went together. Quilting went along with that.

I think it is also important to remember that there is a successful quilt industry now. Many companies and individuals make their livelihood on the quilt movement so this time there is an economic base as well.

I believe that quilts are now a permanent part of the American scene and with all these contributing factors it does seem as though interest and participation will continue to grow.

* See page 14 & 15 for more information.

