

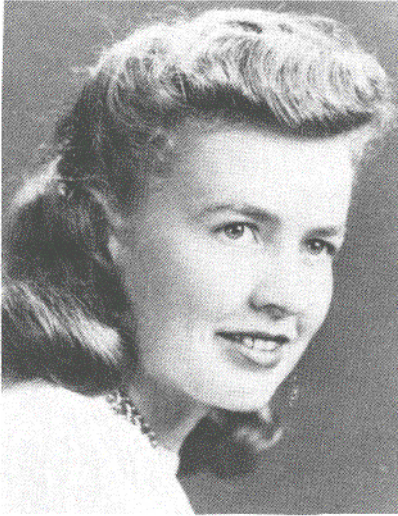
QUILTERS' JOURNAL

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NO. 25



MARY BARTON determines that the fabric in the quilt, the dress and the costume illustration are the same. Photo by Eileen Jennings.



MARY BARTON

by Kris Cable

Kris Cable is a free lance writer with a passion for quilts. She reviewed the Mary Barton Study Center in Ames in the JOURNAL #23

"I suppose you would call me a "CONSERVATOR," said Mary Barton in modest self-description, "I'm just trying to save things for future historians."

And "save" things she surely does! Among her collection displayed at the Heirloom to Heirloom Conference in the summer of 1983 (see JOURNAL #23) were boxes of swatch cards* dated and organized, over forty panels of old quilt blocks, stacks of tops and old, beautiful quilts lovingly care for, hundreds of clippings, old magazines and newspaper articles, clothing representing many eras and notebooks filled with research data on countless quilt patterns. All were meticulously organized, the product of concerned effort by a woman who saw a need and quietly filled it.

Mrs Barton's organizational talents can be traced back to her childhood in the small southern, Iowa town of Indianola. Being the third child but first girl in a family of six gave Mary the opportunity to not only organize her sisters' and brothers' activities, but to instigate activities as well.

According to her Mary's brother Vincent, "Mary was always the one to start 'strawberry fights' with the over-ripe berries.

The family always had a large garden and Mary and her brothers and sisters early developed a business sense by selling produce

*Each swatch is individually attached to a 3" x 5" index card and separated by color into clear plastic shoe boxes.

from their yard as small children. Their mother would load their little wagon with vegetables and they would go door to door to sell them to their neighbors. Mary came up with the idea of wrapping weeds in mulch and she and her sisters sold them as "choice morsels". There was one kind neighbor who would always buy them for two or three cents! Mary and her sisters also picked violets from their yard and sold the bouquets to the girls in the dormitories of a near-by college.

As a little girl in the 1920's, Mary Alice Pemble remembers helping with the animals that were allowed in small towns at the time. Since there were not the restrictions there are now, the family had cows, chickens and horses which the children loved to ride. Mr Pemble was a hardware dealer in the town with his father and his brother-in-law. (The store is still "on the square" in Indianola operated by Mary's older brother Vincent and his wife Marian)

"Money was very tight and mother worked very hard to help with the finances", remembers Mary. "In addition to raising six kids, she sold produce and her own home made cottage cheese to the dormitories at the nearby college.

In the spring of 1928, Mary's parents bought twenty-five acres of ground north of town and started an orchard. The whole family was involved in the planting, weeding and harvesting of the fruit.

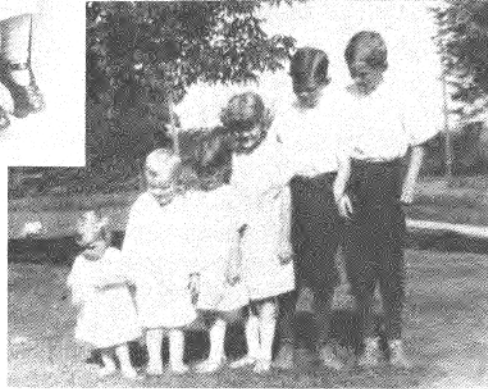
"We had strawberries too. How many strawberries there were! We children got two cents a quart box for picking them. Of course, we had outside help too."

According to Mary's brother Vincent, "Mary was always the one to start 'strawberry fights' with the over-ripe berries".

The girls had so many dolls that they took over one whole room. In the summer the dolls were moved out to the front porch where the girls played with them by the hour. "Mornings were for working -- the afternoons were for playing", says Mary. In addition to playing with the dolls, the girls spent long hours playing "dress-up" with costumes a neighbor had given them.

Two other activities were popular during the summer. The ponies were brought in from the farm so they could ride and Mr Pemble bought a large stock tank to fill with water so the children could play in it to get relief from the hot Iowa summer.

1936 was very dry and the grasshoppers were eating everything. Mary remembers the family all had to get up early every morn-



ing to try to save the crops by spreading poisoned bran around.

Mary was very active in 4-H work and also enjoyed playing tennis, softball and volleyball in her teen years. Vacations for the Pemples included tenting in the campgrounds at the Iowa State Fair where the family "showed" many entries in the fruit, vegetables, and canning divisions.

Mary also entered some of her sewing in the Fair. She remembers in particular her prize winning "Sonja Henie" dress with lots of embroidery.

Holidays were always very special. "What a treat to go to Grandma Lisle's at Thanksgiving, to get together with all the cousins and especially to sleep on the feather beds!"

Mary's first quilt was made for her by her maternal grandmother. Her father's mother also pieced a quilt for her.

Simpson College,* a small Methodist college was located in Indianola near their home and Mary spent her first years of college there. She always had a "feeling for design" and decided to transfer to Iowa State College (now a University)

and major in landscape architecture - a very unusual field for women at that time.

While there, Mary met and later married a fellow student, Thomas A Barton, who was to become head of the department of Landscape Architecture at Iowa State.

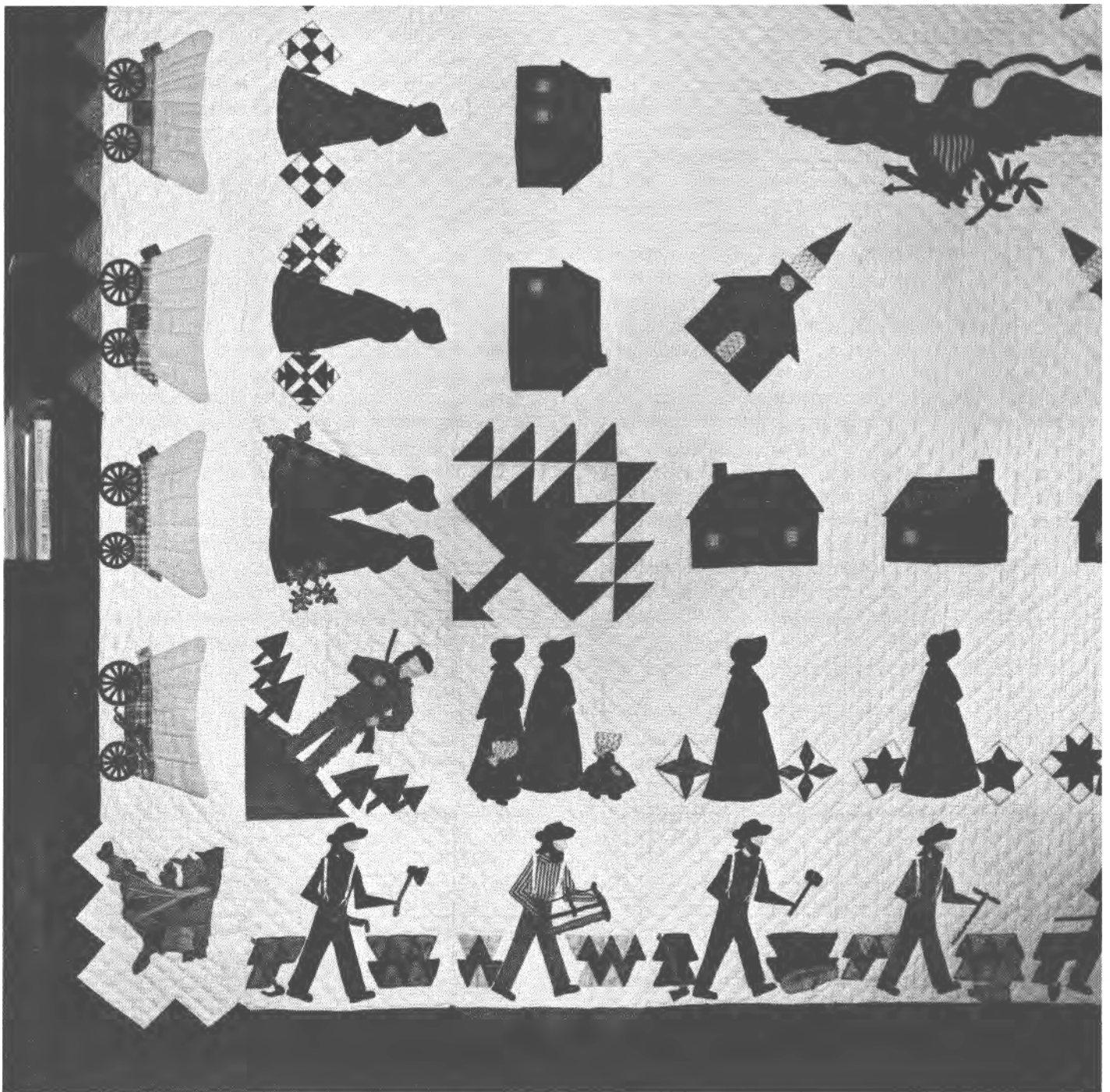
The Bartons have lived in various cities including Kansas City, Washington D.C., East Lansing and Plymouth, Michigan, Indianola, Iowa and finally in 1955, Ames when Mr Barton came to Iowa State. They have four sons, Thomas, Jr., Robert, Arthur and John, and four grandchildren.

As a member of the Faculty Woman's Club, Mary became involved in 1968 with a group called the Heritage Division. It was a special interest group and at one session the members talked about quilts. At that time there was little written research on old textiles and hardly any specifically relating to quilts. This was all Mrs Barton needed to spark her interest in a personal collection of research material.

The result of her study for the Heritage Division was a thoroughly researched program on quilts and quilt history. A charming play, actually performed around a quilt frame, delighted the members and spurred Mary Barton on to yet another project.

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Dr Jeannette Throckmorton also attended Simpson College.



Detail of Mary Barton's "Heritage Quilt". Photo & description courtesy of Mrs Barton.

"Tools being used by the men are chisel, hay fork, maul, wedge, grain shovel, frame or bow saw, hoe, auger, doze, axes & draw knife.

"The women walk a patch of old quilt patterns - for wherever they went the quilt went also."

The "Heritage Quilt" will be on display at the Continental Quilting Congress, Sept 27-30 '84. For info: send SASE (37 to P O Box 561, Vienna, VA 22180

Inspired by much of the research for the quilt program which was presented in January of 1969, she designed and made a Heritage quilt which authentically traced the settling of pioneer America, and specifically of central Iowa. The 100 x 102 inch quilt was completed in 1976 and won first place at the Iowa State Fair that year. The details on the quilt were based on historical record and were so accurate that references and pictures were included in the 1976 ANNALS OF IOWA book by Jack Musgrave, the curator of the Iowa Historical Museum.

All of the blocks were symbolic to Iowa history, but an inside border was especially meaningful to women all over America. It pictured women walking on a path of tiny quilt blocks symbolical of how quilts went with these pioneer women as they settled the country.

Since it was finished in 1976, the quilt has traveled to many shows and been displayed not only in Iowa but across the U.S.*

Writing and performing a play and making a heritage quilt were still not enough for Mrs Barton. Even during the time she was researching and making the quilt, she was beginning her own collection of blocks and swatches, of quilt tops and quilts.

"I started at auctions. I would see quilts and think that it was so little money (to pay) for so much work. My first quilt purchase was a Wild Goose Chase."

The actual collection of today started when she "bought a lot of work" -- a large box of fabric pieces. "I needed to fix something to show all the different fabrics in that box." From there, her collection grew to what it is today.

Mary Barton started collecting indigo blues and the wine reds which were popular from the turn of the century up to the 1920s. (Indigo blue stopped being produced in the 1930s.) "There was nothing to go by except for one label on a piece of fabric from that first box. The label was from the American Printing Company and I knew the only way to begin was to get information about that company. From the dates the company was in business, I learned that in order to establish a reference, I must start with the dated pieces and then compare them to pictures of dated quilts and garments.

**See catalogs NAT'L BICENTENNIAL QUILT EXPOSITION & CONTEST, Warren Michigan @1976 by Lyndon Meo and QUILTS: AN AMERICAN HISTORY by East Bay Heritage Quilters, 1978.*

"Books are concerned with 'furnishings fabric' -- beds, upholstery, draperies. I felt we should have more than that. People who are trying to reproduce garments from specific dates should be able to see what the fabrics in the garments actually looked like. By knowing what fabrics were used in clothing of a certain era, quilt researchers can more easily pinpoint the age of quilts because of their 'scrapbag' aspect. So I started a collection of clothing."

Combining the information of the "clothing collection" and "quilt/fabric collection", Mrs Barton can compare new acquisitions to see exactly what its age may be. "You can see right away when blocks were made at one period and set together much later. One example was a comforter with one block dated "1848" but it was set together with thick batting and pink yarn ties much later.

Old blocks that she has collected have been sewed onto a muslin panel with the same or similar blocks organized together. "One reason for the panels -- I started with one and organized more as the collection grew -- for the researcher they would be more meaningful than just a pile of blocks. Also, if they were mounted they would not be used for small projects and lost for historical reference."

"I'm doing all of this as an educational tool. The collection is divided by decades with patterns giving big clues as to the age of a piece. "For example, in the 20s and 30s, 'Flower Garden', 'Dresden Plate', and 'Double Wedding Ring' were very common. Earlier, the hexagon in the 'Flower Garden' was called 'Mosaic' and it would be totally different because of the fabric used. The 1900's was a time of mostly utility quilts -- using up old fabrics from garments and scrapbags. Certainly, this period shows that not every quilt is beautiful." But Mrs Barton seems to find something in almost every quilt or piece of fabric she sees, if not beauty then perhaps a piece to a puzzle she is solving.

At the time of this interview, Mrs Barton was working on a reproduction of a "Storm at Sea" quilt in dark blue and white. She was working from a photograph in a magazine using the precision technique of English piecing. "I only make one quilt at a time and work only at night when I can relax. Daytime is for other things."

Those "other things" include hiking, researching & filing, caring for the Barton's home and park-like yard, and cooking. (Mary has the reputation among her family of being a marvelous cook.) Last year she promised her family she would give up tennis. Each day she has a "coffee break" with her husband Tom and they play a game of checkers. Who wins? Mrs Barton says, "It's pretty even."

Both she and her husband enjoy hiking along the rivers which border their property collecting "finds" of bison bones and teeth and Indian relics which have swept up on the banks.

The historian in Mary Barton has sparked yet another project which she enjoys. When she has a quilt or a picture of a quilt, she will draft the pattern and make a quilt as close as possible to the original.

Some time ago she inherited 10 family quilt blocks, originally made in Belmont County, Ohio. They had come by flatboat to Keokuck and then overland by wagon to Central Iowa. She didn't want to make them into anything, so stressing family history throughout she has made a notebook of pictures, letters, descriptions and even a map which traces how the piece came to Iowa. "Keep the history with the quilts so historians of the future will have that reference", she advises.

Mrs Barton is hesitant to give advice about quilt care, quilt making or quilt research. "I am an INDEPENDENT researcher I'm doing what I think should be done. One finds out what she can and saves it for the future. I'm not a teacher and there isn't just one way to do something. I can't tell someone from another part of the country how to store her quilts. One has to consider one's own climate. I can't tell someone else how to restore a damaged quilt block. You have to know the history of the piece itself. And my only advice to quilt-makers is - do your own thing."

Mrs Barton does, indeed, do "her own thing" although she admits that purchasing more quilts for her collection now is rare. Storage has become a limiting factor and having examples of so many patterns and fabrics already, she says, "The quilt must be really different for me to buy it now."

In making quilts today, the reverse is true. Mrs Barton likes the old patterns and feels that you don't have to constantly be making new ones. "By taking your fabric and using old patterns, you are creating something new. What I do are always bed

quilts. Many quilters are doing more wall hangings, but I'm so old fashioned, a quilt has to look good on a bed!"

Much of Mrs Barton's collection remains readily accessible in her home. Some of her collection has been given away, mostly to facilities where researchers may study them. Some of the fashion plates were given to the Iowa State University Library and research data and some publications have been donated to the Textile and Clothing Department at the University.

Living History Farms, a working museum of four farms and town area near Des Moines, has benefited from the Barton generosity also. She donated many of the quilts in their collection.

Mary Barton dreams of a "Quilt Cottage". It would have to be a fire-proof, climate controlled building or portion of a building with room for display and research. In addition to the area open to the public she would like to see private research areas where the serious quilt and textile researcher could work using the old textiles and materials. "I am anxious that my things have a home someday!" Other quilt researchers echo her feelings.

Hopefully, collections like Mrs Barton's will find a "safe harbor" in various regions of the country so that not only quilt history may be preserved but also quilt history within the framework of local tradition and custom.

Mary Pemble Barton is unique woman. The little girl who instigated "strawberry fights" and sold weeds as "choice morsels" grew to be the lovely, shy lady who collects "choice morsels" of fabric and builds them into an incomparable collection. The thorough research she does and meticulous care of her quilts and fabrics reflects her love of tradition and history. The twinkle in her eye and quiet smile just hint at the warm personality and the sense of humor which lies below the surface. Her knowledge of textiles tied to quilts, particularly "common quilts" is extraordinary. Her commitment to her family, her state and her quilts should be an inspiration to us all.

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QUILTERS' RESEARCH NETWORK

WESTCOAST QUILTERS' CONFERENCE - Fri
Jul 20 '84. 6:30 pm

CONTINENTAL QUILTING CONGRESS - Fri
Sept 28 '84 6:00 pm