



left: Dr Katharine Berry  
Richardson



right: Dr Alice Berry  
Graham

## THE QUILTS AT CHILDREN'S MERCY HOSPITAL by Barbara Brackman

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The Children's Mercy Hospital is an institution in which the people of Kansas City take pride. They are proud of the hospital's traditions, especially its tradition of giving free care to sick and handicapped children. But there is another little-known Mercy Hospital tradition -the one that has to do with Double Irish Chain quilts.

Dr Katherine Berry Richardson, co-founder of the hospital, was the quilt lover who started both traditions. She and her sister Alice grew up in Kentucky and Pennsylvania in a home filled with quilts and a respect for the abilities of women. Their widowed father gave them a sense of community responsibility and excellent educations. Alice became a dentist; Katy a physician. After marriages which both ended in early widowhood, the Berry sisters began a practice in Kansas City, Missouri. Appalled at the conditions in the city hospitals and touched by the plight of an abandoned crippled six-year-old whom they rescued from the city streets, the women decided to found a hospital where such children could get good care at no expense. The Children's Mercy Hospital was begun in 1897 and it prospered, primarily due to the sisters' forceful personalities.

After Alice's death in 1913, Katherine continued on alone with her surgery and her

fund raising. She has been described in a history\* of the hospital as direct and opinioned and a woman with a terrible temper. She was a dedicated suffragette, as might be expected of one of the few women of the time to be a fellow in the American College of Surgeons.

During the 1920's Dr Richardson decided to build a home for the nurses adjacent to the hospital, then located at 1710 Independence Ave on the city's east side. To add a homelike atmosphere to the institution, she insisted that the furniture be antiques which she had hospital carpenters refinish. To top each bed she wanted a quilt but she was not in favor of "an ugly conglomeration" of quilts. In the May 1926 issue of NEEDLECRAFT MAGAZINE she had seen an article describing Mrs Herbert Hoover's affection for a blue and white Double Irish Chain design. Lou Hoover was then wife of the Secretary of Commerce; she had viewed an exhibit of antique quilts in Washington and was so taken with an old New England quilt that she commissioned a needleworker to make an identical spread for her son as a wedding present.

Upon reading the article, Dr Richardson recalled the quilts of her childhood and decided that this particular design in blue and white to match the nurses' uniforms would be the perfect compliment to the simple walnut furniture in each bedroom. She requested the members of Mercy Hospital

\*A HISTORY OF THE CHILDREN'S MERCY HOSPITAL by Roger Swanson, 1961.



Clubs throughout the country to make quilts to her specifications for the nurses' beds. The industrious club members came through with well over one hundred quilts (one newspaper clipping claims 150, another five years later claimed 250). When Nurse Hall opened in 1927 there was a blue and white quilt on each bed and many in reserve, much to Dr Richardson's satisfaction.

Mrs Hoover's husband was elected president in 1928. One of her fans from Bloomington, Indiana had also seen the earlier NEEDLECRAFT MAGAZINE article and decided to make the new first lady a blue and white Double Irish Chain as an inaugural present. Mrs J L Murray felt Mrs Hoover should have an Irish Chain quilt she could keep, so she made one out of 16 flour sacks which she had dyed blue. This quilt was also pictured in NEEDLECRAFT, (see pg 15) probably inspiring more blue and white Irish Chain quilts.

Dr Katherine Richardson died in 1933 in her bed in Nurse Hall, covered by one of the blue and white quilts she had commissioned. Today The Children's Mercy Hospital is still giving excellent free care to children who cannot afford to pay, but at a new location. Nurses no longer board at the hospital and the blue and white quilts are gone and almost forgotten.

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Compiled by Barbara Brackman & Joyce Gross

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