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Quiltmaking in the Richland, Pennsylvania, Church of the Brethren, 1914-1937

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In 1708 in Schwarzenau, Germany, a group or followers of Alexander Mack formed a church. Calling themselves the Brethren, this group of Christians came to America in 1719 under the leadership of Peter Becker, a colleague of Alexander Mack. They were attracted by William Penn's promise of religious freedom.¹ The Brethren formed their first church in Germantown, Pennsylvania, and later spread to Lancaster and Lebanon Counties and south into Maryland and Virginia. From there they followed the western migration. In 1908 they became known as the Church of the Brethren.

The Richland Church of the Brethren, located in the small town of Richland in the Lebanon Valley of eastern Pennsylvania, was founded in 1919 at its present location on South Race Street.² The Richland Church evolved from the Lancaster County Church of the Brethren, Connestoga congregation. As Brethren migrated into Lebanon County from Lancaster County in 1844, the Tulpehocken Church, consisting of three congregations, was formed. One of these congregations became the Richland Church of the Brethren.³

The following beliefs distinguished the Church of the Brethren:

1. Lay people could interpret the Bible for themselves. Instead of espousing a creed, individual members of the church were encouraged to read the New Testament and apply its teachings to their daily lives.

2. Infant baptism was rejected in favor of adult believers' baptism. The members of the church were sometimes called Dunkers or Dunkards.

Figure 1. *Basket quilt*. Made in 1928 for Margaret Zug. Collection of Margaret Zug. (Photograph by Pat Long.)

3. Pacifism was an important precept. Because the Brethren have taken seriously the teachings against war and taking human life, they developed an alternative service during World War II. This organization known as Brethren Service, was dedicated to goals of peace and the alleviation of human suffering throughout the world.

4. A Love Feast and Communion Service, accompanied by a feet washing ceremony, expressed the egalitarian nature of their beliefs.

5. The Brethren were strongly committed to the separation of church and state. They did not take an oath, choosing instead to affirm. The Brethren were admonished not to take their disputes among each other to court.

6. A "free ministry" of elected preachers and elders formed the

Figure 2. B. Mary Royer, missionary to India, was supported by contributions made by the Sisters Aid Society of the Richland Church of the Brethren. (Photograph courtesy Margaret Zug.)

organization of the church.⁴

In December 1911, a Sisters Aid Society of the Tulpehocken District of the Church of the Brethren was formed with headquarters in Richland. Until 1919, when the separate Richland Church of the Brethren was formed, the Society included women from the three circuits of the Tulpehocken Church.

The four notebooks of minutes from the Society from December 5, 1917, to September 23, 1937, are the basis for the information in this paper.⁵ The notebooks form a continuous record. The information recorded in these notebooks includes devotions, hymns sung, prayers made, and scriptures read, as well as a listing of the activities engaged in and a record of the money raised and its expenditure.

The foremost activity practiced by the group was quilting. It

Figure 3. Clara Wiest, a quilter and member of the Sisters Aid Society of the Richland Church of the Brethren. She is wearing the garb of the sisters of the congregation in the first half of the twentieth century. (Photograph courtesy Margaret Zug.)

appears that quilting was done to order, that is, customers submitted a quilt top and the group marked it, quilted it, and hemmed it. Although most of the work on a quilt was done in frames at the church or at the home of a member during weekly sessions, frequently work was parceled out to be completed at home by individual members. Frequent references to finishing a quilt, marking a quilt, or hemming a quilt by individuals appear in the minutes. A rare entry on October 1935, "Finally finished the quilt—1,250 yds. of thread used," was an exceptional comment. The group also made comforters to order from tops provided, or made from scratch to sell. They sometimes made a plain, all white quilt to sell when there was a lull in orders for quilting.

Other kinds of sewing done by the group to raise money consisted of making aprons, bonnets, dishcloths, and carpet rags. In addition to

these items, the group hired itself out to do plain sewing by the day. In 1915 such sewing was done at the rate of 25¢ per day, per member. In 1930 a notation was entered of a check for \$10.00 received for a quilt made and quilted by the society.

Other sources of revenue were the sale of vanilla, saffron, Jello, copper sponges, and colanders. The records indicate that the ladies catered funerals at the rate of 35¢ per person.

In addition to producing revenue to help others, the sisters gave aid or gifts directly to their own members and their community. In January 1915, the sisters gave Brother and Sister King a quilt in appreciation for the use of a workroom for another year. In September 1916, the group made aprons and towels for the Love Feast Service. Between 1918 and 1919, they sewed for the Red Cross—making sheets, towels, and waists. In December 1926, they gave gifts of oranges and candy to the inmates of the county home. In January 1927, a listing was entered: "Made clothing for Maria Royer, 1 dress, 1 apron, 2 underskirts and 2 nightgowns." In September of the same year they quilted a comforter as a gift for the wife of the visiting evangelist. In October 1930, they made cushions for the church at a cost of \$51.15.

The sisters engaged in quilting and sewing activities on a weekly or bi-weekly basis with exceptions made for church functions such as Love Feast, Ascension Day, Bible School, and sometimes funerals. In 1927 they met on Thanksgiving Day. In 1931 they met on New Year's Day. In 1933 there was a halt in activities for a time due to "scarlet rash." The attendance at meetings during the years of this study ranged from a minimum of four or five to a maximum of fifteen or sixteen. Occasionally a larger group met for some specific purpose such as quilting in someone's home. The usual number of sessions per year was twenty-two to twenty-five, with a peak number of meetings, forty-four, listed in 1929.

The records from 1926 to 1937 list the names of the clients for whom the quilts were made, although occasionally a quilt was referred to by a place name, such as the "Altoona quilt," the "Stouchsburg quilt," or even the "Florida quilt."

Descriptions of quilt design or color were rare. They referred to the quilts as a crib quilt, a silk quilt, or a white embroidered quilt, but

Figure 4. *Trip around the world*. Made in 1926 for Susan Ziegler. Collection of Cordelia Ziegler Klopp. (Photograph by Pat Long.)

not until the end of the period studied were design names attributed to the quilts, and then only rarely. In 1937, they listed a “butterfly quilt” and a “flower garden quilt.”

Their generous spirit was revealed in the way the sisters spent their money. People from the church and community received clothing, help with their doctors’ bills, or money to buy coal. The Society gave the churches of Myerstown and Richland such diverse items as matting for the floor, dishes and coffeepots for Love Feast, hymnals, and a lawn mower. They made contributions to ministers for further education, as well as to B. Mary Royer, a member of the congregation who later became a missionary to India. Institutions such as the orphanage and the old folks home at Neffsville, Elizabethtown College, the Good Samaritan Hospital, and the County Home for the Homeless received gifts from these women. Other

Figure 5. *Log cabin, straight furrow*. Quilted in the 1930s for Ada Bard. (Photograph by Pat Long.)

organizations, such as the Church of the Brethren Annual Meeting; missions in India, Denmark, Sweden, Africa, China, and Georgia, and the Red Cross, all received contributions of money from their earnings.

A later notebook of the year October 1, 1955 to October 1, 1956 reveals that there were eight members of the Sisters Aid Society quilting at that time. Of the eight members listed, four appeared in the fourth notebook of January 1931 to September 1937. Although there were no records available between 1937 and 1955, I would assume that quilting continued in the intervening years.

After 1955 the Sisters Aid Society became known as the Women's Fellowship. Although the goals of the Women's Fellowship were similar to those of the Sisters Aid Society of raising money to help people in distress, the link with quiltmaking was a more tenuous one.

The quilting group became a separate entity working within the Women's Fellowship. Today this group makes a contribution of a quilt or two to be auctioned at the Annual Disaster Relief Auction for the Atlantic Northeast District of the Church of the Brethren. The quilting group of the Women's Fellowship made a quilt in 1983 that was sold for a record-breaking price of \$1,375.00. This group also does quilting to order as was their custom in the past. A separate group of women in the church today makes comforts to be given to the needy or sold to earn money for the benefit of the relief projects of the church. They make approximately sixty to eighty comforts per year.

I interviewed members of the church today who are descendants of the Sisters Aid Society who reminisced about quilting in the Richland Church of the Brethren during the years of this study. The members included children and grandchildren of some of the women listed in the four notebooks between 1914 and 1937. Margaret Wiest Zug, a granddaughter of Clara Wiest, a member of the Sisters Aid Society, remembers threading needles for the women. Her grandmother was an accomplished needlewoman who at one time in her life supported her family with her sewing. Margaret didn't learn to quilt but she became the custodian of the family quilts.⁶

Carlos Wiest, a grandson of Clara Wiest, remembered occasions in the early twentieth century when the quilters went by sleigh to a quilting party at the farm of Monroe Mock. He quoted Mamie Bross, a member of the Richland Church of the Brethren, saying of the quilters, "Es iss en recht nescht," that is, "It is a regular nest (of gossip)." ⁷

Ray Kurtz, a son of Annie Kurtz, a member of the group, and of Michael Kurtz, who was the first elected free minister of the Richland Church of the Brethren, remembers that his mother and father moved to Richland from their farm outside of town in 1935. At this time his father visited the quilting group frequently and threaded needles for them as well as leading them in scripture on occasion. Ray opines that the quilting at the church was done mostly by older women whose family responsibilities had lessened.⁸

Cordelia Ziegler Klopp, a daughter of Charles Ziegler who was a free minister of the Richland Church of the Brethren and his wife

Susan, recalls that her mother had the Sisters Aid Society to their farm once or twice a year to quilt tops that the members of the family had prepared and to serve them dinner. Cordelia's role on these occasions was to help with the food, thread the needles, and help turn the quilt in the frame. Her mother, who had nine children, was unable to quilt regularly with the group.⁹

Cordelia wrote a poem to describe her feelings about a quilt that she made at this time.

A Quilt - My History

1928-1929

I am a tired, almost worn out old quilt.

Prestigious I am not.

I am unique, only because I have many characteristics that are unknown to some of you.

I was born out of necessity during an era when the "Horn of Plenty" was not evident at every turn of the way, as in our present day.

We needed a bed cover.

My family lived on a farm where feed for animals was delivered in strong muslin bags, engraved with either Purina or Eshelman Feeds from J. L. Zug Co. or H. K. Shenk's Mill.

After these bags served that purpose, they were boiled in hot water and lye soap to remove printing and then cut down to size.

My quilt Mother decided to experiment by putting a pattern on each bag square and sewing it on the sewing machine, so the much needed quilt would be ready to cover those dear little members of the family in good time.

You can observe the hard wear of all my once strong parts. I am quite threadbare in spots, but still strong.

I served my family well, having covered as many as eight children and many visitors, and moved around on many beds in my household. I never knew which bed I would be asked to cover, or who the guests might be at any time.

There was always room for many in my household.

I am retired now, but not tired.

My name is "Love." It covers all.¹⁰

Esther Ziegler Wenger remembers that quilting at the church was connected with prayer meeting day. The women commenced their quilting after dinner at noon and continued until the prayer meeting service in the evening.¹¹

Mildred Layser Yoder is a granddaughter of Ada Bard who was a member of the group as well as the recording secretary during the period of the third and fourth notebooks 1925 to 1937. She remembers seeing her grandmother mark quilts on the kitchen table.¹²

Verda Gibble is a daughter of Fianna Eckert, a member of the Sisters Aid Society. Verda was the youngest of four children and had moved away from home when her mother was active as a quilter in Richland, but she remembers that the quilters charged one and a half cents per yard of thread for their quilting.¹³

Eleanor King, a daughter of Isaac and Ida King who ran a general store in Richland, recalls that her grandmother Mary Geib permitted the ladies of the church to quilt in a large room over the store before the church in Richland was built. Another quilter, Agnes Landis, who lived with them for a time, recorded that quilting was done by the church women before the church was erected and dedicated in 1914. Eleanor remembers that her mother was too busy raising a family of seven children to quilt until they were grown. But while her children were growing up, Ida made quilt patches at home for the group.¹⁴

Using the list of quilts made by the Sisters Aid Society between 1914 and 1937 I was able to find and photograph sixteen quilts that are still owned by descendents of the clientele of this group. Some of the quilts are also linked to the quilters working during the same period, as some of the quilters were also clients of the society.

The expenditure of the funds the group raised, as well as the more direct aid they made to their church and community, reflected the spirit with which these women practiced their religious beliefs. It was not until 1929 that the sisters were permitted to break communion bread.¹⁵ In this male-oriented society, the quilting they did and the experience of working together supported them in their daily lives as well as providing an outreach to their church and community. This group of women practicing the craft of quilting in Richland, Pennsylvania, was one group out of hundreds throughout the Brotherhood of the Church of the Brethren and other churches who helped to keep

the craft of quilting alive in the early 20th Century.¹⁶

Notes and References

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2nd Notebook: Minute book of the Tulpehocken Aid Society beginning first meeting December 15, 1917, through December 8, 1921.
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4th Notebook: Minute book for the Sisters Aid Society January 1, 1931, to September 23, 1937.
 Minute book, Ladies Aid Society, October 1, 1955 – October 1, 1956.
6. Interview with Margaret Wiest Zug, February 1983 and July 2, 1988.
7. Interview with Carlos Wiest, February 1983.
8. Interview with Ray Kurtz, July 2, 1988.
9. Interview with Cordelia Ziegler Klopp, July 2, 1988.
10. Original poem written by Cordelia Klopp in 1987.
11. Interview with Esther Ziegler Wenger, August 17, 1988.
12. Interview with Mildred Layser Yoder, July 2, 1988.
13. Interview with Verda Gible, July 4, 1988.
14. Interview with Eleanor King, October 23, 1988.
15. Church of the Brethren Eastern District of Pennsylvania, *History of the Church of the Brethren Eastern Pennsylvania 1915-1965* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania: Forry and Hochoer), 120.

16. The following is a list of names of members of the Sisters Aid Society of the Tulpehocken Church of the Brethren which evolved into the Richland Aid Society, for the years 1914-1937. The names are recorded alphabetically, with the numbers (1, 2, 3, 4) of the notebooks in which their names appear.

1. Mary Balsbaugh	2-3
2. Ada Bard	3-4
3. Mary Bollinger	1-2
4. Mimi Bollinger	2
5. Stella Bollinger	2-3-4
6. Lydia Brubaker	1
7. Mary Brubaker	1-2
8. Emma Buch	1-2-3-4
9. Annie Eckert	1-2
10. Fianna Eckert	3-4
11. Ida Eckert	2
12. Ella Erb	1
13. Amanda Frantz	1-2-3-4
14. Emma Frantz	4
15. Lydia Gipe	2
16. Lizzie Haak	1
17. _____ Herr	1
18. Eliza Hertzler	2-3
19. Sallie Holsinger	2
20. Clem Hostetter	1
21. Leah Jacoby	4
22. Sallie Keller	2
23. Celesia King	3
24. Hannah King	4
25. Ida King	2
26. Lydia King	1-2-3
27. Polly King	4
28. Mamie Kline	4
29. _____ Kretchner	1
30. Anna Kurtz	3-4
31. Agnes Landis	1-2
32. Margie Layser	4
33. Nora Layser	4
34. Susan Layser	2-3-4

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| 35. Lizzie Leinbach | 1-2 |
| 36. Lizzie Miller | 2-3-4 |
| 37. Kate Mohler | 2-3-4 |
| 38. Sallie Petrey | 3 |
| 39. Mary Reber | 1-2 |
| 40. Martha Rentschler | 3-4 |
| 41. Naomi Rentschler | 2 |
| 42. Timna Rentschler | 4 |
| 43. Amy Royer | 4 |
| 44. Lizzie Royer | 1-2-3-4 |
| 45. Maria Royer | 1-3 |
| 46. Rebecca Sheetz | 2 |
| 47. Elsie Shenk | 4 |
| 48. _____ Weaver | 3 |
| 49. Clara Wenger | 2-3-4 |
| 50. Clara Wiest | 1 |
| 51. _____ Yoder | 3 |
| 52. _____ Ziegler | 3 |