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Nebraska Quiltmakers: 1870–1940

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The pioneer women and men who settled the grassland plains now called Nebraska faced a harsh environment and long days of hard labor to make the new land their home. Most settlement of the territory occurred after the Civil War and after Nebraska gained its statehood in 1867. Prior to that time millions of people crossed Nebraska en route to Oregon and California, but few regarded Nebraska as a desirable destination. In fact, they often referred to Nebraska as the "Great American Desert."[1]

The growth in the population of the state during the 1860s was spurred by the passage of the Homestead Act in 1862. The construction of the railroads contributed even more to the growth of population in the state during the 1870s. Railroad entrepreneurs launched an intensive advertising campaign promoting Nebraska so they could dispose of the large tracts of lands given to them by the government to finance the construction of the railroads. They produced pamphlets touting Nebraska as almost a "promised land" and sent them to prospective groups in the east and overseas. The pamphlets, traveling exhibits, and promotional lectures convinced thousands of people to head for Nebraska. The population of the state quadrupled during the 1870s. By 1890 the state boasted more than one million inhabitants, many of whom were foreign born.

Many stereotypical images of the frontier environment suggest that it was a man's domain and one where only the most determined and rugged of men could survive. In fact, most of the settlers arriving between 1860 and 1900 were married couples who settled down

to farm and raise families. Life in the new land was harsh and challenging, physically and emotionally. Sex roles, particularly for women, often were blurred by necessity as frontier women took on whatever work was necessary in the field, as well as their traditional domain, the home.

Recent scholarship describes the importance of women's contributions in forming frontier society.[2] Yet, much research remains to be done to fully document women's role in the settlement of the West.

Data Collection and Analysis

The Lincoln Quilters Guild initiated the Nebraska Quilt Project in 1985. The paucity of information about midwestern quiltmaking traditions led to a desire to document existing quilts, particularly surviving nineteenth- and early twentieth-century quilts before the quilts were worn out or sold to buyers outside the state. To prepare for the project, twenty members of the Lincoln Quilters Guild attended training sessions on photography, the context of folk art in Nebraska, oral interview techniques, fiber and fabric analysis, and the documentation and dating of quilts. In this way, a core group of Guild members became trained "para-professionals" who collected data during the Nebraska Quilt History Days under the supervision of Frances Best, the project director. The twenty sites selected for the Quilt History Days represented the ethnic, geographic, and economic diversity of the state. Eighty-two of the ninety-three counties in Nebraska were represented in the survey, providing a broad sampling of the state's quiltmakers and quilts for this study. The trained volunteers registered over 1,000 quiltmakers and nearly 4,000 quilts between April 27, 1987 and June 15, 1988.

The Quilt History Days were conducted according to procedures modeled after those successfully used in other states and are described in detail elsewhere.[3] Information about the quiltmaker's life, motivations, and quiltmaking practices garnered from the questionnaires provided the major source of data for this study. In addition, project members conducted ninety-four taped interviews with quiltmakers who were willing to share their practices and life experiences or quilt owners who could shed light on the lives and practices of

early quiltmakers. The transcribed oral interviews served as a source of anecdotal information about Nebraska quiltmakers.

On the basis of the analysis and interpretation of this large body of data, a demographic profile of Nebraska quiltmakers emerged as well as insights into their quiltmaking practices and motivations for quiltmaking.[4] This paper summarizes those findings and offers our interpretations of them.

A Demographic Profile

The majority of Nebraska quiltmakers were rural women with grade school educations living on farms or in small communities. Most married which was not surprising as most women of the era eventually married.[5] As one Nebraska quiltmaker relates,

> Well, it was just part of being. . . . The women in those days . . . when they grew up married. . . . If you weren't married your father or brother had to support you and take care of you. It was very rare that a woman remained unmarried. And so, to prepare yourself for marriage and having a home and children, you learned to sew and to cook, and it was just part of your life.[6]

Most Nebraska quiltmakers had two to four children, the norm for American women between 1870 and 1950.[7] Although some novelists and historians characterized the plains pioneer woman as mother of ten to twelve children, most women settling the Plains during the last quarter of the nineteenth century had only three to four children.[8] The typical Nebraska quiltmaker was no exception; her frontier household usually consisted of herself, her husband, and a few children living together. While some Nebraska quiltmakers did have large families, as many as fourteen to sixteen children, most did not.

Nebraska quiltmakers participated in a variety of occupations including teaching, dressmaking, farming, ranching, nursing, retailing (hardware stores, general stores, antiques stores, and department stores), domestic services (housekeeper, hired girl), and clerical services. A few were telephone operators, beauticians, or bookbinders. One was a postmistress. The majority were ranch wives, farmwives, or housewives, as were most women of the nineteenth and first half

of the twentieth century. Of the Nebraska quiltmakers who worked outside the home, most were teachers or dressmakers. This reflects the times: In 1880, four-fifths of all American women engaged in non-farm employment worked as teachers, servants and laundresses, clerks and salespeople, dressmakers, milliners, and seamstresses.[9] The majority of white working women throughout the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century were young and single; women usually abandoned or were required to quit work for pay when they married.[10] A number of Nebraska quiltmakers mentioned that they, too, gave up paid work when they married.

The largest identified ethnic group within Nebraska quiltmakers were Germans followed by English, Czech, Irish, Scotch, Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian. The ethnic background of the quiltmakers reflects the ethnic background of Nebraska's immigrants in the late 1800s, most of whom were Germans followed by smaller but significant percentages of Swedes, Irish, Czechs, and Danes.[11] Many of the quiltmakers or their parents came to Nebraska following the American Civil War when a wave of migration populated the remaining western territories. This movement started during the 1870s and subsided by the 1890s when almost all of the railroad lands and public lands had been transferred to private ownership. One quiltmaker's family came to Nebraska following the Civil War with a colony settling in Gibbon in 1871. A grandson, Leroy Walker, describes their experience as follows:

> Colonel Thorp got a bunch of people together by advertising. They all got on the train in the eastern states, all strangers to each other, and they came west and settled at Gibbon. All nationalities: Irish, English, just whoever happened to answer the ads. . . . Grandfather [a Civil War veteran] when he came to Gibbon had twenty dollars in his pocket, not enough to get out of there so he had to stay [in Nebraska]. Besides Grandma told him this was our last move, because every time they'd moved they got poorer and poorer and poorer.[12]

Religious groups were active in the settlement of Nebraska during those years. For example, Lutheran pastors led many groups of Scandinavian immigrants; Congregationalists founded York; and the Mennonite leader, Peter Jansen, helped establish several Mennonite communities near Lincoln.[13] Most Nebraska quiltmakers were

Methodists or Lutherans. Of the remaining quiltmakers, most identified themselves as Catholic, Presbyterian, Christian, Congregational, Baptist, or Mennonite. Methodist and Lutheran religious perferences are generally associated with those of English, German, and Scandinavian descent, while Catholicism is often associated with those of Czech and Irish descent.

Although Nebraska had a diverse population in which national or religious groups frequently dominated rural communities and maintained their language and customs, neither the project members nor the researchers observed strong ethnic influences on quilt construction and patterns in the quilts and quiltmaking practices of Nebraska quiltmakers. If distinctive quiltmaking traditions existed among the immigrants when they arrived, they did not survive for long. In fact, differences may not have existed at all. According to family tradition, Mary Novotny Lahowetz pieced a Basket quilt in Bohemia in the 1850s then quilted it after her arrival in America. It is similar in pattern and construction to other Nebraska-made pieced quilts of the period. Her quilt and another one made by a German quiltmaker for her brother traveling to America stand as evidence that immigrant women not only brought the necessary sewing skills for quiltmaking with them to America, they brought pieced blocks and even quilts to their new homes. If any differences in quilt styles and construction techniques existed, the sharing of patterns and construction techniques quickly obscured them.

Motivations for Quiltmaking

The majority of Nebraska quiltmakers started quiltmaking as a form of self-expression and a pastime that they enjoyed. Quiltmaking allowed women to escape the rigors and drabness of their everyday routines into a kaleidoscopic world of color. The personal satisfaction derived from this pastime was an important motivation for Amelia Barbe who continued piecing quilts even after she started to lose her eyesight. Her granddaughter relates:

> I have some of her tops that she pieced together on the treadle sewing machine after she lost most of her eyesight. She was blind in one eye and had about only twenty per cent vision in the other eye, but she

> kept on piecing. Some of the pieces don't meet, some of the seams kind of go off all over the place, but it's interesting that she kept on trying to do the handiwork after she lost her eyesight.[14]

Ellen Maxwell found quiltmaking therapeutic. She made a crazy quilt to overcome grief following the death of her baby girl from diphtheria during an epidemic in the winter of 1892. According to her granddaughter:

> Grandmother was so laid out by the death that she was unable to go on with her life. And so Grandpa ran or took a horse over to the neighboring couple, an older couple, who had lost their only child many years ago. [The neighbor] gathered up scraps of velvet and silk and old linsey-wool and strands of thread and showed Grandma how to fashion pieces and then embroider flowers and birds and so forth on it. [Grandma] patiently put them together. . . . She tacked the flowers or fruit from a seed catalog and then embroidered over it, then picked out the paper behind. That's how they did, they didn't have patterns in those days you know. And so, she feather-stitched around each piece. . . . Each night she would work by the light of the lamp. . . . Gradually she got better. . . . Grandma got hold of her life again and finished the quilt and folded it up and put it away. . . . When we'd ask to see the quilt, she'd get it out, but she never used it because the memory in each scrap would just tell her about her baby daughter.[15]

Some quiltmakers quilted because they needed warm bedding, and they found quiltmaking an economical way to meet this need. Some quilted to demonstrate their thriftiness and careful use of scarce resources. Perhaps the words of Genevieve Young from Nebraska City best express many quiltmaker's reasons for saving scraps.

> I have collected fabrics all my life, and I just never thought it was wise to throw away even an inch of fabric. I always collected all of the tiny pieces that nobody else wanted, and I always thought it would be awfully nice if you could just put all those pieces, roll them all together like you do pie dough, then roll them out and have one piece.[16]

Others made quilts because they had little money to do other things. According to her family, Gertrude Scudder made her Trip Around the World quilt during the Depression of the 1930s "because you didn't have any money . . . she made quilts."[17]

Although many maintain the popular notion that pieced quilts

were born out of hardship and economic necessity, most Nebraska quiltmakers did not cite that motivation. Some quilts are so complex and the needlework so fine that it is clear that the quiltmakers did not cite that motivation. Some quilts are so complex and the needlework so fine that it is clear that the quiltmakers did not hastily assemble them to provide warm bedding. Instead, the quiltmakers created objects of beauty and pride that displayed their exquisite needlework skills and artistic abilities. Certainly pioneer values of thriftiness and industriousness encouraged virtuous women to devote their free time to quiltmaking or other forms of needlework, but necessity was not the quiltmaker's major reason for making quilts. Instead, most respondents noted that the reason for making quilts was the pleasure and satisfaction derived from making useful and beautiful items for their families.

For rural American women, especially those settling the frontier, there were few opportunities for artistic expression. Painting, sculpture, and other fine arts were considered far too frivolous for most rural women to undertake. Quiltmaking, which produced a useful item for their families, afforded women an acceptable avenue of creative expression. From the numbers of outstanding quilts that have survived, it is clear that many women exercised this option.

Special occasions such as birthdays, graduations, marriages, and births prompted a great deal of quiltmaking. Of these, weddings and births, occasions that mark new beginnings, inspired the most quiltmaking. Family members usually received the quilts made for these occasions. Lena Burger of De Witt described the number of quilts that she made for members of her family when they married. "All twenty of my grandchildren, they all got their quilt, or are getting it. When they get married they get their quilt."[18]

Quiltmaking Practices

In general, quiltmaking was a lifelong activity. The hardships of relocation and settlement in a sometimes hostile land did not interrupt quiltmaking activities for long, if at all. For example, Clarissa Griswold made a beautiful crazy quilt while she sat her homestead claim in Sioux County, Nebraska, between 1885 and 1886. Sophia Hinrichs and her daughter, Helena Hinrichs Prange, provide yet another ex-

ample of the many women who made quilts while living under most unfavorable conditions during homesteading years. They pieced their fan quilt while living in a dark, dank dugout, the temporary home of many plains pioneer families.

Some women started to make quilts as children because, in rural households, children and adolescents were expected to participate in the household work of their families. Household responsibilities included learning needlework skills. Throughout the nineteenth century, girls frequently learned to sew before they learned to read, and they sometimes pieced simple quilt blocks at an early age, as young as two or three, to practice and improve their sewing skills.[19] Many quiltmakers related stories about their childhood quiltmaking experiences. Belle Frasier of Parks, Nebraska, the youngest quiltmaker included in this survey, started her first quilt when she was three and a half years old. It was a simple Four Patch. "Just little squares," as she described it. "My mother would cut them out and pin them together and mark where I was supposed to sew."[20] Peg Kildare of Ogallala remembers how her mother insisted every afternoon that I sit down at a certain time and put that quilt together. "Oh, I got so I hated it . . . but she made me finish. . . . I had to sit there, and now I'm glad she did because I never start anything but what I finish it."[21] Another quiltmaker said, "I think my mother learned me to quilt when I was twelve years old. She started me out sewing carpet rags. Just kept on, kept on until I learned to quilt."[22]

These anecdotes illustrate that quiltmaking skills, like most needlework skills, were transmitted by adult women to young girls. Almost seventy per cent of the quiltmakers surveyed learned their quiltmaking skills from family members, usually mothers, but occasionally from grandmothers, aunts, or sisters. While about twenty per cent indicated that they taught themselves to quilt, they probably learned the necessary sewing skills from other women. Only two women indicated that they learned to make quilts in classes. Quiltmaking in Nebraska reflects a widespread feminine skill usually transmitted from mother to daughter in the home. While this may be typical of the transferral of quiltmaking skills in rural families across America during the time, it contrasts with the eastern tradition in affluent urban families where girls often learned needlework skills through special ornamental needlework classes in private finishing schools or boarding schools.[23]

While some quiltmakers started to quilt as children under their mother's close supervision, the majority of Nebraska quiltmakers made their first quilts as young adults. Many young adults made their first quilts for their dowries or to accommodate the needs of their young families.

Although the majority of Nebraska quiltmakers started to quilt as young adults, there were a few who began later in life (after sixty years of age). One of these, Marie Jahnke of Bancroft, noted,

> I lived on the farm for thirty-five years. . . . It was a little while before I moved to town when I started quilting. When my husband quit farming then I didn't have to help as much, but otherwise I was always out there helping him with everything, plus going to work everyday.[24]

Surprisingly, about one-third of the Nebraska women surveyed made most of their quilts during mid-life when they had children at home. Although they had many demands on their time during these years, they found time to quilt. Some quiltmakers pieced their quilts during spare moments while doing other farm work, such as Ardyth Triplette, an Ogallala quiltmaker, who said,

> I spend my whole life waiting on men because I drive a corn truck and bean truck, and it seems like you spend all day settin' in line to dump. And so I just take my quilt box with me and I work 'em sittin' in the truck.[25]

Almost an equal number indicated that they made most of their quilts after their children were grown. They had more time to devote to quiltmaking during those years. In addition, many women expressed a desire to create something for which they would be remembered, an heirloom to be passed down to family members.

Some women quilted into their eighties, and a few women were ninety years old when they completed their quilts. Whether the motivation to quilt was to satisfy their desire to create a thing of beauty for themselves or their descendants, to satisfy their sense of the proper way to use their time and scarce resources, or to provide warm bedding for their families, many women made quilts throughout their lives.

Many Nebraska quiltmakers believed they made their best quilts after their children were grown. They could devote more time to

quiltmaking, and they had a lifetime of experience in quiltmaking and sewing to apply to the task. Surprisingly, an equal number of quiltmakers believed they made their best quilts during mid-life when their children were at home. Although women had fewer responsibilities and demands on their time when younger and preparing quilts for their dowries, few women thought they made their best quilts as young adults. Sewing was a measure of a woman's ability as a homemaker and the consummate feminine skill during the nineteenth century. Apparently most women believed that their skills improved over the years and, of equal importance, they continued to devote the time required for meticulously crafted quilts although burdened by a multitude of chores as farmwives and mothers.

When asked about the frequency of quiltmaking, seventy per cent responded that they quilted frequently, while thirty per cent quilted on an infrequent basis. The frequency of quiltmaking often depended upon factors like the time of year, how much time was available to quilt, and the occasion for which the quilt was made. An upcoming birth, marriage, or high-school graduation in the family often provided the impetus for more frequent quiltmaking. The time of year affected the frequency of quiltmaking for those who lived on farms because seasonal work influenced the amount of time available for needlework. Seasonal responsibilities, especially during the spring, summer, and fall, proved particularly demanding. Wintertime was frequently mentioned by quiltmakers as the time of year that they could devote to their quiltmaking activities. But women made quilts year round and in many unlikely settings. Irene Alexander recalls that her mother always wanted her children to have something to do while they were out herding the cows. "We would piece the blocks by hand and use our time that way. We also did embroidery work while we were there."[26]

Very few Nebraska quiltmakers made over one hundred quilts; most made fewer than fifty quilts and many made fewer than ten quilts. However, some women were truly prolific. Minnie Geise Sukraw made about 1,300 tied quilts, largely for overseas relief.[27] While tied quilts took less time than those that were quilted, this accomplishment is nonetheless remarkable.

Quiltmaking is a time-consuming task. Although some quilts were completed in six months and others spanned a life time, the average

Nebraska quiltmaker completed a quilt in about two years. In general, quiltmakers devoted the time necessary to make products that reflected meticulous care and craftsmanship, and that would reflect well on their needlework skills. The amount of time required to produce each quilt is an argument against the popular notion that the major impetus for quilting during the nineteenth century was the urgent need for warm bedding by penniless settlers who had little other than scraps and rags from which to make their quilts.

Nebraska quiltmakers purchased and used about as much new fabric as dressmaker cuttings or scraps. This was apparent in the number of registered quilts that had a matching sashing, border, or backing; the quantities of material required for this effect were more likely purchased than available from cuttings or scraps. The colorful and varied prints in the pieced blocks were usually the only parts of the quilts that came from dressmaking cuttings. Because pieced quilts effectively used these scraps, Nebraska quiltmakers made pieced quilts in far greater numbers than applique quilts which generally required larger amounts of matching fabrics. The bountiful number of pieced quilts was noted in the North Carolina survey for similar reasons.[28] Worn-out clothing was rarely used by Nebraska quiltmakers. However, recycled flour, salt, sugar, tobacco, and feed sacks sometimes appear in quilts, and, on occasion, old neckties and political ribbons.

Most Nebraska quiltmakers named no favorite pattern according to responses on the survey forms. However, those few who identified a favorite pattern usually mentioned the Double Wedding Ring, Dresden Plate, or Grandmother's Flower Garden. More Double Wedding Ring and Gradmother's Flower Garden quilts were registered in the state during the Nebraska Quilt Project than any other patterns, which further supports their favored status among Nebraska quiltmakers.[29] When asked why a pattern was a particular favorite, responses included that it was economical to make (Double Wedding Ring, Friendship, and Log Cabin), colorful (Nine Patch), appropriate for grandchildren (Sunbonnet Sue and Overall Boys), and beautiful and meaningful to them (Double Wedding Ring). When Abba Jane Johnston found a pattern that suited her, the Barn Raising variation of the Log Cabin, she "never strayed from it." According to her great-grandaughter:

> It was a trait that carried through into many aspects of her life and gave real meaning to the word *method* in Methodist. She was not known for deviating from the straight and narrow! But she was known for her good deeds, and no doubt her sewing skills came in especially handy when she stitched up the lip of a woman cut in a butchering accident—a legendary story in the family.[30]

Family, friends, and neighbors were among the most often mentioned sources of patterns for Nebraska quilts. Quiltmakers exchanged patterns much as they traded recipes. During the 1930s and 1940s Louise Howey of Lincoln, exchanged patterns with about twenty-five quiltmakers across the United States and Canada through round robins.[31] Another important source of patterns among quiltmakers was the print media: books, women's magazines, and newspapers. Surprisingly, almost a quarter of the respondents indicated that the quilts were original designs. However, careful scrutiny of the quilts identified as a quiltmaker's own design showed that over half of them were signature, friendship, or crazy quilts, and a third were variations of traditional designs. Only a few would be regarded as truly original designs.

Nearly two-thirds of the quilts registered were quilted by the quiltmaker herself rather than by someone else. This is not surprising since quiltmakers, like many artists, nurture the vision of their quilts from selection of the pattern to completion in the quilting frame. Therefore, they wanted to control each step of their quilt's development from the first to the last stitch. Some women preferred to quilt alone because they were very particular and did not want irregular quilting stitches to spoil their carefully pieced or appliqued tops. When asked if she ever quilted with groups, Jessie Hervert of Kearney replied, "No, I like to make the stitches myself. Even the twins never helped me stitch my quilts. Because not that they couldn't do it good enough, but because I don't sew like they sew."[32] When asked if she quilted for other people, Peg Kildare responded, "Just for the senior citizens. But my own quilts, I do all my own quilting."[33]

Distance between neighbors, farm duties, and parenting responsibilities sometimes required quiltmakers to quilt alone. Mary Catherine Ray Newkirk, for example, lived in Washington County, west of Blair. In 1877, she came from Effingham, Illinois, with her seven

brothers and sisters. They didn't have a social life at all because they were miles from their nearest neighbors and because "they struggled to live and keep warm and not [let] anyone get sick."[34]

While Nebraska quiltmakers spent many hours quilting alone, some also participated in quiltmaking activities for fellowship and fundraising at church, community clubs, and even in their homes. The majority of those who quilted with groups usually did so in church groups or a friend's home perhaps because of similar traditions, language, interests, and philosophies. Katheryn Thomsen of Omaha remembers when she lived in the country how her mother would have quilting parties. "It was complete enjoyment for these people to come over. . . . Sometimes after they quit my mom would go over and look at the quilting and she would take out [stitches made by] the person in the club who made large stitches."[35] Obviously fellowship was more important than progress in the quilting. Her mother held the parties despite the fact that some of the quilting that occurred did not meet her standards. Lois Hanson remembers, as a girl growing up in Holdrege, that the women in her mother's clubs did a lot of quilting together. "They were [quilting] mostly for pleasure, and I suppose they needed the quilts. It was a friendship thing where you got your neighbors together and visited and quilted."[36]

Summary

Quiltmaking in Nebraska was a practice of thriftiness, a well-regarded feminine pastime, and an enduring form of self-expression. Nebraskans prided themselves in their hard work, frugality, and resourcefulness. Their quiltmaking clearly reflected these values. Consequently, quiltmaking remained a popular activity among rural women throughout the years of Nebraska's settlement and development and well into the twentieth century. Despite the difficulties and hardships which Nebraska women surely encountered during the early years of settlement, they found time for quiltmaking.

The quilts that Nebraska quiltmakers made and their reasons for making them mirror women's many and varied roles. As nurturers, women made quilts for their own infants and grandchildren; as social communicators, women made friendship, signature, and album quilts

for their friends and families; as moral guardians of the family, women made quilts to raise funds for their churches and for other worthwhile causes; as accomplished seamstresses, women made quilts with incredible numbers of pieces and quilted them with stitches so tiny that they sometimes require a magnifying glass to see. Their quilts are valuable artifacts because they elicit memories of their makers, family members, and special occasions; because they are symbols of family heritage and traditions; and because they are beautiful examples of women's folk art.

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