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Emma M. Andres and Her Six Grand Old Characters

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Between the years 1920–1950, six *male* needle-workers received awards for their quilting creations. Resulting nationwide publicity brought these men to the attention of an avid quilting "hobbyist," Emma M. Andres, of Prescott, Arizona.

The Andres family moved to Arizona at the turn of the century where Emma was born in 1902. Her father manufactured cigars and owned a tobacco store on one of the main streets of Prescott. After graduating from high school, Emma, the only one of five Andres children interested in the family business, began a sixty-five-year career at that location. In the small community of fewer than six thousand potential customers, the Andres Cigar Store carried an extensive inventory of nationally distributed newspapers and magazines.

Emma, an avid reader, sat behind the counter filling empty hours absorbing current events from papers as well as needlework items in periodicals. "When magazines came, my world started. In the pages of magazines and newspapers I found the people and ideas to inspire my work and change my life."

Responding to an ad in a 1931 Woman's World magazine, Emma sent for an applique quilt kit. She stitched in the store and at home, quickly completed the quilt, and sent for another kit. In addition to stitching, she was also reading and researching quilts and quiltmakers. Emma began to correspond with individuals throughout the country including Carrie Hall, Florence Peto, Bertha Stenge, Rose Kret-

singer, as well as the six male needleworkers and numerous others. Savoring every reply, she carefully taped the letters into scrapbooks and in her replies enjoyed sharing her quilting accomplishments. Emma's father teased her about spending all the store profits on three-cent stamps. The next few years found her totally immersed in this new "hobby."

Her subsequent collection of fifteen scrapbooks containing letters, newspaper articles, and mementos, as well as her memories of these unusual men, are rich resources for information on these male needleworkers, whom she called "the grand old characters." Emma's earliest interest in these needle-wielding pioneers is documented in a scrapbook entry of 1940: [All quoted materials reflect the punctuation, spelling and syntax of the original sources.]

In 1932 saw pictured in the Arizona Republic, Mr. Chas Pratt with his Famous pieced Quilt made of tiny squares "Called, "Ninety & Nine" or in other words the Picture of the Good Shepherd. This really stayed vividly in my mind and think it kept me interested in the hobby and looked forward someday to writing to the Famous Man Quilt maker. No doubt this was the beginning of the idea of writing to others interested in creating quilts out of the ordinary. It was eight years after this that I finally found the whereabouts and address of Dad Pratt by finding in Philadelphia Inquirer in the Picture section his picture with another of his quilts. We surely got to be good Pals.²

Charles Pratt was born in Manchester, England, in 1851. He immigrated to the United States in 1886, and settled in Philadelphia. In his mid-thirties, utilizing skills he had developed as a carpetmaker, he began to design and piece quilts. His quilts consisted of thousands of small squares, which he arranged to form unique pictorials and unusual mosaic-like motifs. He pieced his quilts by hand, usually using silk fabric. He sewed a backing fabric to the top, envelope style, but did no quilting. Research in English and American quilt publications suggests that Charles Pratt's quilts, which he began in the late nineteenth century, may be the earliest known examples of this style of patchwork.

Mr. Pratt took great pride in his quilts and entered them in competition for over fifty years, receiving more than four hundred ribbons for his labors. In his letters to Emma he enjoyed making charts

Figure 1. Charles Pratt hand piecing quilts at age eighty-nine, ca. 1940. Philadelphia Inquirer photo.

of his favorite quilts showing how many pieces each contained and how many first place ribbons they had won. Although he did not enter his quilts in "little fairs" he set a goal to win a blue ribbon from each of the forty-eight states. This turned into a twenty-year goal which he finally achieved in 1930. He described the culmination of this dream in a letter to Emma.

It took me a long time for to win in The last State. . . . they wanted to keep the Quilt that I sent to their Fair for they kept it three months, and they told me that they had never received it. But I wrote to the Chamber of Commerce in Nevada, and they soon found it for me, and the Chairman, wrote and told me not to be discouraged, but to send another one next year, but not to send it to the secretary of the Fair, but to the Manager. I did and it came back, with a nice blue Ribbon for the first prize and the last state of the 48. I had been working for near 20 years for to win in all states. What Quilt won the last State, Your favourite, The Ninety and Nine.³

The Ninety and Nine, Emma's favorite, was to enchant other artisans as well. Carrie Hall described Pratt in her 1935 book as "a man who is fascinated with the artistic possibilities of the patchwork quilt." Florence Peto, intrigued by Hall's reference to Pratt, finally located him through Emma Andres. Mrs. Peto exerted a great influence on quilting in the 1930s and 1940s. She wrote quilt articles for national women's magazines, published two of the few quilt books printed in the first half of the twentieth century, and lectured on quilting to thousands of women in the eastern United States through women's groups and museums. Impressed with Mr. Pratt's concept and design ability rather than his construction techniques, she began in 1941 to exhibit Charles Pratt's quilts during her lectures. Pratt, flattered by Peto's interest, expressed his pleasure in a letter to Emma.

The reason is because Mrs Peto wants the loan of it to take on a Lecture tour and She also wants a picture of the Ninety and Nine 8 X 10. I believe it is to put in a book. Surely She must be a Smart Woman to be Able to Lecture, and make one of the best books on Quilt Making in this World, and I do know that I will do anything or loan Her anything, if it would help Her in the least.⁵

Mrs. Peto continued to exhibit Pratt's quilts long after his death. In 1948 Mrs. Peto wrote to Emma, describing the

hundreds, thousands, of people that have had joy from Mr. Pratt's Ninety and Nine; \dots I am afraid it will wear out but I keep reminding myself that he told me he wanted people to see his work.

Pratt's work not only delighted Emma but also served as inspiration for her own creative endeavor. Seeing newspaper photos of Pratt's quilts in 1932 so impressed Emma that she attempted the new technique: pictorial postage stamp patchwork. The resulting redand-white quilt, composed of 3,630 squares, featured a woman seated at a spinning wheel. It won a merit award at the Sears Century of Progress quilt contest in 1933. At the beginning of their correspondence in 1940, Emma sent photos of this quilt to Mr. Pratt to which he responded warmly.

So in closing my letter, I dont think that you can make a nicer picture than the Woman at the spinning wheel, I think that it is wonderfull for you and I was just looking at it when your letter came.⁷

After her initial success, Emma continued to develop a unique perspective for her quilt designs. By 1940 she had completed two original quilts, Out Where the West Begins and the Arizona State Flag quilt, which exemplified her growing expertise with construction as well as concept. Both quilts won blue ribbons at the 1940 Arizona state fair. She sent photos of them to Pratt, to which he replied.

Surely I was glad to hear of Your success at Your State Fair, and it being the first time Exhibiting them, but I do not wonder after I saw the picture of You and Your Quilt. it is Beautiful in every way. Nice laid out and a design out of the ordinery. I like it for it is Beautiful and I wish You all success in the future and Now You are a Champion Quilt Maker.⁸

Of this encouragement Emma reflected:

The inspiration of Mr. Chas Pratt's famous quilt had been planted deep, trully, & things seemed to lead toward a dream of a reproduction of it. 9

Charles Pratt died in 1941 at the age of eighty-nine. After his death his daughter sent Emma nine of his quilts as recognition of their

Figure 2. Emma Andres seated in front of Charles Pratt's quilt, Ninety and Nine, holding her scrapbook containing correspondence from Charles Pratt with his last top (unfinished) draped across her lap, ca. 1942.

short but intense friendship. Emma displayed these at formal quilt exhibits she organized during the 1940s, and, later, she hung them in the cigar store. In 1942 Emma began to make a reproduction of Pratt's Ninety and Nine, using thousands of one-half-inch fabric squares. The resulting picture quilt of Jesus holding a lamb brought together Emma's love of quilts and her deep religious sentiments. Emma considered this quilt, completed five years later, to be her masterpiece.

After reading the chapter, "Quilts Designed and Made by Men," in Florence Peto's book, *Historic Quilts*, Emma undertook correspondence with several. One of these was Harry D. Kendig, a railroad car repairman. A native of Newberg, Pennsylvania, born in 1878, Kendig learned various needle arts from his mother. He described his early work to Peto and Andres. "My mother was an expert with the needle, . . . and I give her all the credit." "I like to Embroider or anything that is done with the needle." "I have all kinds of needle work some I made when I was 14 years old and now I am 65 so you see they are getting old." "I

While Kendig created his quilts for his personal enjoyment, his outstanding workmanship was widely recognized. He pieced and appliqued equally well. Kendig observed, "No other needle but mine goes into the making. . . . If anyone else took a stitch in my quilts, I'd take it out!" His work, which included a Grandmother's Flower Garden quilt with 4,477 patches, a Wild Rose and Irish Chain with 5,985 patches, and an appliqued Morning Glory, caused Peto to write, "his fingers seem to be equally dextrous whether executing handsome applique designs . . . or piecing geometrics with precision and accuracy. . . . The quilting stitchery on all these quilts shows superlative workmanship." Kendig described his work in a letter to Emma.

The quilt that I just finished is very pretty, I put it in the frame on New Years day and took it out on January 30th, I do all this work in the evening, as I did tell you that I have quilyed [sic] four this winter allready and have one more to quilt but I do not know if I will get it done this winter as my fingures are sore from being pricked with the needle.¹⁴

Kendig's attention to detail was rewarded by nationwide acclaim when the Winter 1939–1940 issue of McCalls Needlework Magazine,

Figure 3. Snapshot sent to Emma Andres by Harry Kendig featuring his Yellow Dahlia quilt, ca. 1940.

featured his Yellow Dahlia quilt along with an article. In January 1943, the now-famous quilter wrote to Emma Andres.

I have a scrapbook with all the letters I have received regarding my needle work, I have letters from all over the United States and several from Canada. . . . I do not despley my quilts at county fairs as they get soiled but there is a lot of women come to my home to see them. 15

The third male needleworker with whom Emma corresponded was Albert Small, born in High Wycombe, England in 1885. Immigrating to the United States as a young man, he settled in Ottawa, Illinois, where he worked at a sand plant, handling machinery and dynamite. As a relief from the dangerous and laborious requirements of his job, he took up quilting as a hobby. Intrigued with scores of tiny pieces, he boasted in his first letter to Emma, "I had an uncle that made a guilt of 25,000 pieces while he was in India in the English army."16 As Albert Small watched his wife and daughter-inlaw piece a quilt he wagered with them that he could make a quilt containing more and smaller patches than they could. He then proceeded to design and stitch a guilt with 36,141 pieces. His second quilt of 63,450 pieces established him as the piecing champion of the country. With his third quilt he had cut and stitched a total of 224,000 tiny pieces, a feat in which he took great pride. He wrote to Emma Andres concerning his quilting endeavors.

Put about 4 hours in at my quilt every night but am getting close to the finishing point I have got about 110,000 pieces in the quilt now and I figure about 3 to 5000 more to go in so you see I have not been idle. 17

Another time he commented "a little sleepy I put about 225 pieces in the quilt tonight so feel a little tired." In order to give Emma some idea of the size of the pieces used, Albert wrote: "You might be interested in knowing I get 1700 pieces out of one yard of material." The tiny pieces, carefully cut out and then sewed together are hexagon in shape. A dime will cover four of them and almost cover the fifth."

In August 1940, Al Small visited Emma in Prescott, and they exchanged samples of their needlework. Emma later expressed her fascination with his skill: "You ought to see him, . . . putting those tiny pieces together with his long, nimble fingers." And of Emma's work Albert wrote, "I show your photos to lots of People they are a little different to the usual run of quilts."

Nor was Emma alone in her admiration of Albert Small's talents. Florence Peto featured him in a chapter, "Quilts Designed by Men," in her book *Historic Quilts*. McCalls Needlework Magazine (Summer, 1939) and Colliers Magazine also included enthusiastic articles con-

Figure 4. Albert Small completed this quilt containing 63,450 pieces in 1939.

cerning his quilts. Albert's final creation, a mosaic quilt containing 123,000 pieces, brought a new wave of publicity in 1950 and 1951, as "Ripley's Believe It or Not," "Paul Harvey's national radio broadcast," and "Strange As It Seems" all reported the achievement.

Emma's relationship with Albert and Eva Small, nurtured from a single letter written to a stranger, endured for over fifteen years, years in which they shared the significant events of their lives as well as

their love of their hobbies, quilting and painting.

From 1935 to 1945, a middle-aged carpenter with large, scarred hands was receiving accolades for his embroidery. Although not a quilter, Emma Andres included Arendt J. Kuelper as a correspondent because of his impressive needlework ability and his love of textiles. Seeing a picture and an article in the *Denver Post*, Emma promptly wrote Arendt J. Kuelper, receiving a reply dated January 8, 1942.

If I would stop to think about the stitches that it takes to make a piece like the last supper, no one would start a work like that, but I Love it I never weary evenings. I put in 3 1/2 to 4 hours, then I put on Coffe Pot, smoke cigar, sit hour to hour an half and enjoy my work.²³

Indicating his insistence on detail, Kuelper wrote that ordinary embroidery thread was not fine enough, nor did it come in a sufficient variety of colors. Hence he used a single strand of mercerized cotton: "Ordinary cotton is dull, flat, dead. It won't give a piece of art needlework the proper life. . . . I just draw the picture with thread, sort of sketching with the needle as I go along."²⁴

In September he wrote, bragging, "The last supper has been called a Master Piece, sure I am proud of it, when folks come here to look at it I give them a magnifying glass." But his humility concerning his work emerged as, he replied to the clippings and photos Emma sent him of her work: "Looking at the Pictures, seeing not only the neat clear distict work also the *Patience* must be your midle name, your work is beautiful. You may rest assured that I will look at your pieces to see what I can learn." Referring to wallhangings he sent her to use in an exhibit he wrote "I know you will be a good critic as you know all there is to know about the needle and how to push it."

Figure 5. This large wall hanging, Custer's Last Stand, was embroidered by Arendt Kuelper and took him over two thousand hours to complete. Associated Press photo, ca. 1942.

Mr. Kuelper's last major project was a large wallhanging entitled "Custer's Last Stand." This piece measured $28^{1}/_{2}$ inches by $52^{1}/_{2}$ inches, used 150 shades of thread, and took him over two thousand hours to complete. An Associated Press release resulted in inquiries from Universal Pictures and eventually led to a newsreel featuring Mr. Kuelper and his work, a newsreel which was shown nationally for four years. Kuelper wrote of the same press release, "They said that the Pictures and story would be sent out to every country in the World except Germany & Japan." 28

Despite his fame, Kuelper does not seem to have shared his work with many. Concerning a gift he had sent to Emma, he wrote, "Out side the table cloth I gave my brother you are the only Person I ever made a piece for, everybody has quilts but every body has not the Head of Christ." Perhaps his reticence to bestow his works as gifts was rooted in memories such as one he shared with Emma.

I shall never forget when I visited in St. Louis I stayed with my youngest brother, during my visit he asked me if I had a hobby. I said yes. he said What. I said Embroidery. I looked up and I can see that sickly grin on his face. Discustingly he said Embroidery but he changed his tune.³⁰

But despite such painful remembrances, this creative man knew the value and the source of his inspiration.

Call what you and I are doing a Hobby, strange as it may seem, neither you or I could do it. if it were not inside of us, . . . it is something finer than what we can see or feel. 31

Another artistic soulmate had meanwhile come to Emma's attention. Eighty-year-old Leopold Aul had been a subject of interest in the Winter 1941–1942 issue of McCalls Needlework Magazine. After reading about the card table cover he had designed and stitched, Emma obtained his address from the magazine and launched upon a lengthy correspondence with "Uncle Leopold" and "Aunt Selina." Leopold, she learned, was something of a health fanatic.

I very seldom make up my mind to get sick as I dont believe in it. I have not been sick in 39 years the reason. I take the J.B.L. Casead that gives you a high Colonic Bath which takes all the poison out of your systom I was in the Liggett Store Demonstrating it for 7 years and won the first prize of 50.00 for my Salesmanship. 32

Andres also learned that although Leopold Aul was a professional musician, he had a multitude of hobbies and had been introduced to quilting by his father, a skilled tailor.

When I was 14 years old my Father made a Crazy quilt of Satin pieces. It gave me an idea and I wanted to improve on it, so I started on my design work, and when I was 22 I had my bed spread finished, and all through my playing where I had time I continued to work on different pieces. which are many.³³

Over the years, Aul sent Emma many samples of these pieces and one of his patterns. To achieve his intricate designs, Mr. Aul cut out the small pieces precisely, basted them onto a foundation, and delicately double-cross-stitched all the edges using a fine pink buttonhole twist. Selina Aul described one of his creations in a letter to Emma.

He has a beautiful Bed Spread made of Skinners Satin, also a table cover made of Skiner Satin, and then there is his masterpiece a round card table cover made of Military cloth It has hearts Diamonds, Spades and Clubs and Red, white, blue and yellow Chips around the Edge of it. 34

In January 1942, Aunt Selina reported with pride that they had received and rejected an offer of \$600 from an art dealer for this masterpiece of a table cover.

Figure 6. Leopold Aul and the card table cover he considered his master-piece. McCall's Needlework Magazine photo, 1941–42.

Emma's correspondence with Leopold Aul ended in 1950 when Mr. Aul was almost ninety but still in good health. Thirty years later, in 1980, Emma wrote to and received a reply from his granddaughter, reminiscing on the lovely painting Emma had sent her for her thirteenth birthday and ending with the observation that she, herself, was now fifty years old.

An extraordinary man of exceptionally broad interests, Milan H. Johnson, was the last of Emma Andres' grand old characters. Johnson was born in Templeton, Massachusetts, in 1857, and settled in Keene, New Hampshire, as a young man. He was a professional furnituremaker who taught cabinetwork in the Mechanical Arts department of the Keene High School. A lifelong member of the First Baptist church, a drummer in the Keene Brass Band, owner of the first tandem wheel and the first safety (low wheel) bicycle in town, the multi-faceted Mr. Johnson acquired early a skill and enthusiasm for creating beautiful things. In a letter to Emma he described one woodworking project. "Inlaid Box containing 30,910 pieces of colored woods. Worked on it as my hobby at different times over a Period of 20 years." "35"

From his woodworking hobby, Johnson ventured into quiltmaking as a creative outlet, incorporating in this field his love of intricate and various design. He revealed the complexity of his artistic vision in a December 1943 letter to Emma.

A week ago last evening I finished quilting my quilt that I have been at work on so long, and which I have talked about in all of my letters. . . . There are a few over 3,000 pieces in it of 21 different shapes and it took 13 stencils to do the marking the different quilting designs and now I can the count up of quilting stitches is 189,847, . . . And I know if I could realy get the exact count there would be many over 190 thousand. 36

On May 8, 1945 Johnson attached a note to one of the more than 220 aprons he pieced.

Germany is licked. Our boys gave them what they asked for and Japan will soon get hers. Inlaid wood used to be my hobby, but Quilts are now. In the last 12 years I have made 12 quilts and in my best one I put 195,000 hand quilted stitches. I have just finished this apron and am 87 years old and a descendant of John Alden of the Mayflower fame.³⁷

Over a period of six years, Emma and "Uncle Milan" carried on an enriching correspondence, exchanging ideas, techniques, photographs of their quilts, and comments about mutual friends in the quilt world. For example, Johnson candidly discussed with Andres his opinions of other contemporary quilt artists.

I wont take a back seat as far as old gentleman Pratt is concerned for I could do all the work he did and according to what you wrote about his sewing a great deal better, but he could never do the quilting I am doing. But since seeing mrs. Peto's quilts and the nice fine work in them I shall have to take a back seat, but if I was ten years younger now I would start in and make a Quilt which I am sure would put most of them in the shade.³⁸

Emma's handwritten note concurs. "Mr Milan Johnson Keene NH 85 does most perfect piecing & quilting himself. No woman could beat his work." Milan expressed a longing to meet his correspondent friends in person.

If you and I and Mrs Peto . . . could only meet together what a talk feast we would have. I am going to have some warmed up canned baked beans for my dinner. Want some? well jump over and help me eat them⁴⁰

In another letter Johnson offered opinions on Bertha Stenge, a nationally known woman quiltmaker.

I wrote to her right away asking her all about her Victory quilt and whether she designed that or how she got the pattern. And it seems she secured it from the Womans Day and she wrote to the Magazine and had them send me the pattern. She wrote me that she did not do very much quilting herself but hired it done and sometimes paid out good money for very poor wook. I sure would never let anyone else do any work on my quilts and then let people think I made it.⁴¹

Mr. Johnson loved his quilts and was generous in sharing them. He sent two of his favorites to Emma to display in the cigar store window. He wrote of the unusually designed Double Wedding Ring quilts "You need not send the quilts back at the end of the month! You may keep them a month or more longer."

Just before his eighty-seventh birthday, "Uncle Milan" wrote to Emma.

Figure 7. Milan H. Johnson sitting at his sewing machine piecing quilts, ca. 1940.

The quilt I have told you about that I am now trying to finish I am sure will be my last one. . . . It is about half done but I am only able to work on it about 2 or 3 hours a day. . . . In that time I can only put in 4 to 5 hundred of those little stitches and there must be nearly a hundred thousand I must get in. 43

A few months later: "My eyes seem to be failing me and I may be as bad off as Old Mr Pratt was." But despite his failing eyesight he seemed unable to stay away from the sewing machine and his quilting hobby.

I have been very busy for the last few days making patchwork fancy aprons and giving them to our Ladies Aid Society to sell at their sale. They are getting \$1.50 for them and I have made 9 for them.⁴⁵

Mrs Peto is only interested in very old quilts and so I have never

asked her to display mine at some of her lectures. I have already sent her 10 Aprons though. 46

On December 11, 1946, the valiant old man wrote for the last time.

I am obliged now to write to 10 or more of my friends and this will be the last work I will ever write to them. I can see a streak of black smudge now as I write. I am growing weaker every day as time goes by. Good luck to you and lots of thanks for you have done to help me through Life. 47

On April 27, 1948, his housekeeper wrote "Some time in the night he had a stroke & died." Uncle Milan Johnson's scrapbook contains Emma's handwritten note. "The 3rd Grand Character gone—He was Grand."

The midpoint of the century brought preoccupation with other ideas and concerns, and quilting slipped into a slumber from which it did not awaken fully until the American Bicentennial stimulated a resurgence. The decline of public interest in quilts and quilting is reflected in the lives of Emma and her friends. At least three of her grand old characters had died by 1950. Advanced age, new interests, hobbies, and social change limited the production of the others.

Emma Andres continued to exhibit not only the work of her masculine friends but her own as well. The old Cigar Store, her "Exhibition Hall" in Prescott, eventually evolved into the Happiness Museum, the place where Emma lived until her death in 1987, surrounded by her quilts, her mementos, and her scrapbooks. And all her memories of her long-gone friends. Perhaps she echoed in her mind Arendt Kuelper's sentiments:

Though acres lay between us.

And distance be our lot

If we should never meet

Dear Friend forget me not.⁵⁰

The "grand old characters" of Emma Andres were six men of various backgrounds and vocations, bound together through their love of needlework and the creations of their minds and hands, their discipline and devotion to their craft.

As needleworkers the men exhibited patience and perseverance,

but they also developed strengths in other areas resulting in the individual and unique looks they each achieved. Without exception, each man exhibited a strong individual design style which set his own work apart. Of the six, only Kendig and, to a lesser extent, Johnson created with published patterns. Pratt, although influenced by carpet designs, was a pioneer of pictorial quilts. Kuelper and Kendig continually experimented with color and its impact as the dominant elements in their work. Kendig alone emphasized an elaborate, rich use of quilting, relegating the pieced or appliqued surface to secondary importance. Small's sewing ability of minute pieces, Aul's tiny and delicate double-cross-stitches, and Johnson's original quilting designs demonstrated their high level of proficiency in these skills.

Time was also a major commitment these men made. By devoting many hours every week, usually every day, to their handwork, most of them were able to complete several complex projects a year, year after year, while working full-time and supporting families. For the men widowed before 1950, the amount of time spent in their quilting *increased* after the deaths of their wives. Well-rounded individuals, they kept themselves busy in their spare time developing skills in the areas of gardening, cooking, painting, skeet shooting, collecting, and other crafts.

These grand old characters were competitive people who were good at the needlework they did. The fact they were also men in no way diminishes their accomplishments. Anomalies in a field dominated by women, they have earned a place. Today, all lovers of the quilting art should recognize that the contributions of these men increased the scope of quilt history.

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