Uncoverings 1992

Volume 13 of
the Research Papers of
the American Quilt Study Group

Edited by Laurel Horton

❖ ❖ ❖

Quilting in Webster County, Nebraska, 1880–1920

Kari Ronning

This study examines the kind of quiltmaking activities taking place in a rural, midwestern area in the period 1880–1920. Webster County, Nebraska, was chosen because it is one of the representative sites chosen by the Nebraska Quilt Project; extensive primary sources such as newspapers of the period are available; unique literary materials are available since the area is depicted in many of Willa Cather's novels. The newspapers of the period record quilts, quiltmakers, quilting parties, charitable quilting activities, and county fair results; the newspapers also advertise the goods available to quiltmakers and their prices. The frequency and content of the newspaper records help to document the changes in quiltmaking fashions, revealing that Webster County followed the eastern, urban fashions in the 1880s when it was still a frontier community; despite the improvements in mass communication which took place in the early years of the twentieth century, the revival of quiltmaking which was taking place in urban centers did not spread so quickly to this community, where quiltmaking was seen as an activity for older women, and quilts were little valued.

In 1849, in a story published in *Godey's Lady's Book*, T. S. Arthur lamented that quiltmaking was a dying craft; other writers in the general women's magazines later in the century spoke of quilting as if it were dead.[1] Yet the great number of quilts that have survived from the last half of the century shows that not only did technical mastery remain, but that design inventiveness, especially in pieced

work, was reaching new heights. This discrepancy shows that these writers were out of touch with what was actually being done by women in rural America; by examining quiltmaking activities on a local level, where it was actually practiced, we may be able to get a better idea not only of what quilting was being done at the end of the nineteenth century, but whether and when—perhaps even why—quiltmaking declined in popularity.

We know little as yet of the conditions under which quiltmakers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries worked or how their activities were valued by themselves and by the communities in which they lived; often we do not even know who the quiltmakers were. The quilt projects of various states have done valuable work in locating quilts and identifying makers, but the information collected about quiltmaking in the past usually relies on the memories or oral histories of the owners of specific quilts. If we are to get a broader picture of quiltmaking activities in communities in the past, these memories should be supplemented by other sources of information. Ideally, the historian would like to read diaries of quilters which would reflect on quiltmaking activities. But the diaries of women who lived in the nineteenth century and before have not often been preserved; as most quiltmakers were women, quiltmakers' diaries are rare.

Fortunately there is an additional source of information which is available for most communities in this country: the local newspapers. This study uses information on quilts, quiltmakers, and quiltmaking activities found in the newspapers of Webster County, Nebraska, to get a picture of the state of quilting there at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. The picture will inevitably be a partial one, since a newspaper presents the public side of life; the quilter working at home for domestic use is usually ignored. However, the attitudes toward quiltmaking presented in the papers would have been part of the influences on the private quilter.

Webster County, in south central Nebraska, was one of the representative areas chosen for the Nebraska Quilt Project's study. Its chief claim to fame is that it was the home of the Pulitzer prize-winning novelist Willa Cather (1873–1947), and its landscape and

people are depicted in many of her novels. Webster County is a predominantly rural area of mixed farming and stock raising. The area was used as a hunting ground by native Americans, primarily of the Sioux and Pawnee tribes. The first white settlers, led by Silas Garber (later governor of Nebraska), arrived in 1870. By 1883, when Willa Cather's family came from Virginia to join family members who had pioneered in Webster County, they found a diverse population, with immigrants from abroad who formed well-defined settlements of Czechs, Germans, French-Canadians, Norwegians, and Danes.

In 1880, Webster County was an essentially frontier community. It was connected to the outside world only by the recently arrived links of the railroad and the telegraph lines; both these links were liable to be cut off in times of heavy rain or snow. By 1920, the area was more densely settled than it is today and was near the peak of its prosperity; movies, electricity, telephones, automobiles, rural mail delivery of newspapers and magazines as well as of letters, brought Webster County from the fringes of American society to the heartland.

However, quiltmaking in Webster County, as reflected in the newspapers, did not follow the same lines of progress as other aspects of life. In the 1880s, when life was still comparatively primitive for many of the inhabitants, quiltmakers and newspaper editors were tuned into the prevailing fashions: silk quilts, log cabin quilts, outline embroidered quilts, and above all, crazy quilts. The Webster County *Argus* noted in its report on the 1885 county fair that "Webster County mothers and daughters can make their homes as attractive as any place on the wide earth if their exhibits of silk quilts, worsted work, and needlework of all kinds is a sample of their prowess."[2] The year before, the Red Cloud *Chief* had noted the "handsome quilt" exhibited by Mrs. Douglas Terry of Cowles;[3] I suspect that "handsome" and similiar words in these contexts means silk quilts, as opposed to "plain" cotton ones. Thus, the *Chief* notes that "John Parks was given a handsome quilt for his 50th birthday by his mother in McCook;"[4] in 1887, a "fine quilt" was one of the items to be auctioned off at a church social;[5] and a "handsome log cabin quilt" was offered as a prize to the most popular young lady at a Presbyterian church festival.[6]

The fashion for outline embroidered quilts, whose popularity began in the early 1880s,[7] was apparent in Webster County as early as 1884, when Mrs. Cook and Mrs. Brewer took the first two prizes in this category at the county fair.[8] Outline stitch work was also known as Kensington embroidery; Mrs W. W. Gardner, who ran the second best hotel in Red Cloud, was commended for her Kensington embroidery at the 1886 county fair;[9] Mrs. M. R. Bentley, wife of a local moneylender, gave a Kensington embroidered spread as a wedding present in 1889.[10]

Signature quilts are seldom mentioned in the Webster County newspapers; the few that are mentioned seem to have been presentation quilts to ministers rather than fundraiser quilts, for which people paid a small fee to have their names embroidered in outline stitch on the top. One country correspondent mentioned a quilt presented to Mrs. Wolff, the Methodist minister's wife, which had the names of the donors embroidered on the blocks. [11] Pioneer Methodist minister George Hummel recalled that "many of the quilts [given to him] bear the names of those long departed from this life,"[12] which suggests that such presents were more commonly given than recorded in the papers. However, one or both of the "two fine quilts" which the *Chief* notes were given to Mrs. Hummel in 1892 may have been signature quilts.[13]

Quiltmakers in the late nineteenth century did not have the large network of quilt magazines, newsletters, and quilt art books of a century later to tell them what quilters in other parts of the country were doing. Once in a great while, however, the syndicates which supplied preprinted pages of national news and feature stories to small newspapers would run news stories about notable quilts or quilt–makers. One such story, printed in 1896, describes what seems likely to be an outline embroidered quilt:

A Marvelous Quilt

Mrs. Joshua Biles, of Southington, Conn., has been working on a bedquilt at odd times since 1892, which is a wonder in its way and deserves special notice. The material is a twilled cotton, and is made of forty-one

> squares, seven squares each way, but the inner square takes up nine of the ordinary ones. On this is inscribed, in blue stitching, which is readily deciphered, the names of all the soldiers that went to the civil war from Southington, together with a picture of the soldiers monument. On the other squares are the pictures of places and persons of local note, such as the pastors of the churches, the postmasters of the three villages, the assessors, the contractors and builders, merchants, etc., the names of the various manufacturing firms, with the list of officers, pictures of various historic buildings, and names of the secret societies represented in the town in 1892. Mrs. Biles has been untiring in her efforts to finish this remarkable work, and it is now stretched upon a frame.[14]

Although it is not a local item, this description can furnish some insight into a number of aspects of quiltmaking, such as the length of time it took to complete a project of this sort, and it may have been a possible source of design ideas for other quilters. Most strikingly, it illustrates some of the qualities a quilt needed to attract the notice of male editors: evidence of great labor, easy decipherability, and celebration of masculine achievements; it seems unlikely that many women's names are included among the soldiers, pastors, contractors, and manufacturers represented in the quilt.

The crazy quilt dominated fashionable quiltmaking in the 1880s; and again, Webster County quiltmakers were right in style. Mrs. Terry and Mrs. Cook took first and second place for crazy quilts in the 1884 county fair.[15] Interestingly, crazy and embroidered quilts were the only categories of quilts for which the names of prizewinners were published; apparently ordinary pieced or applique quilts, if they were entered at all, were not considered worth noting. The prestige of crazy work was such that even a silk crazy work pillow was considered enough of a drawing card to be advertised for a fundraising auction.[16] When Ruby Lafayette's Dramatic Company appeared in Red Cloud, the advertising announced that Miss Lafayette would wear her celebrated crazy quilt dress, composed of over 2,500 pieces of silk and satin.[17] In 1890 a "crazy tea" social was a great success.[18] The prestige of the crazy quilt impressed even the male editors of the newspapers, who almost never mentioned any other work of women's hands; one paper noted that William Letson's birthday present from his mother had been "an elaborate combination of crazy-

work."[19] As crazy quilts began to be made in humbler fabrics in the 1890s, they went out of fashion in urban areas, especially in the east; but in Webster County, enough prestige lingered into the twentieth century to make a silk crazy quilt the prize of a drawing held by the Degree of Honor, a women's society, in 1902.[20]

The oddest mention of crazy quilts to be found in the Webster County papers was not, however, a local item. Another syndicated feature told the story of Ada Martin, a Michigan quilter, who had suffered paralysis of the legs and loss of speech some years before. She occupied herself by making crazy quilts with patches which had been autographed by famous people to whom she sent the fabric. When she received a patch signed by President Cleveland, she was so excited that she accidentally knocked over a stand by her couch, which caused a loaded revolver on the stand to fire; the bullet hit her leg, curing her of her paralysis and speech loss.[21]

Clearly silk quilts, crazy quilts, and outline embroidered quilts were the most prized and publicized quilts in Webster County and the nation in the last decades of the nineteenth century. One other kind of quilt has always attracted attention: the quilt of many pieces, which awes quilters and nonquilters alike by the sheer work required to put it together. Virginia Gunn notes this tendency of editors in her study of state and county fairs in Ohio also.[22] As early as 1881, the *Chief* took note of a local woman, "Mrs. Parkes, a lady over 70 years of age [who] has just completed a quilt which contains 4,375 pieces. Any one acquainted with the tedious labor of quilt piecing can form an idea of the magnitude of the task accomplished by this aged lady."[23] The making of this quilt, clearly a show piece, indicates that not all the quilting done in frontier Nebraska was of a utilitarian nature. The news item also shows one male attitude toward quiltmaking: that it is "tedious labor." However, some male quilters have seen the quilt of many pieces as a challenge, and have sought to set records for numbers of pieces in a quilt.[24]

Most of the quilts made in the county were made by the "tedious labor of quilt piecing," a part of women's everyday work. Like many of the *Chief*'s country correspondents, "Betsy" [Elizabeth B. Knight] lamented the difficulty of finding news to send in. She wrote, "I could do as one of your gentlemen correspondents does, write about

myself, I could tell how many loaves of bread I had made, the number of pies I had baked, how many quilts I pieced, and when I intend to clean house, etc., etc."[25] The off-handedness of this demonstrates vividly the utilitarian role of much quiltmaking in this period.

It appears that most quiltmaking was done alone. The picture of the quilting bee as a frequent activity in nineteenth century women's lives is not borne out by the Webster County record. It may be that quilting was a part of family gatherings and social events that were not specifically for the purpose of quilting and were not recorded as being quiltings. However, the physical difficulties of gathering people together in the rough and sparsely settled countryside of Webster County in the 1870s and 1880s were great; roads were little more than wagon tracks over the prairie, and horses could not often be spared from farm work. Most of the mentions of quilting bees and quilting parties found in this period date from the 1890s, when the population density was greater, hired help was available for more women, roads had been established and were maintained, and improvement in the means of communication, such as Rural Free Delivery and telephone systems in the mid- and late 1890s made it easier to issue invitations.

The newspaper items concerning quilting parties are especially interesting because they show how quilting was in transition in public opinion. The *Argus* on August 6, 1891, records a quilting bee at the Amack's house in 1891 that was clearly in the established tradition of a social event for various ages and sexes: "the young people in the evening had a good time until early morning." At a similiar quilting in 1893, the correspondent records that twelve young ladies and the men came in the evening.[26]

Only a few months later, however, it is reported that the Albrights have had an old-fashioned quilting, "a pleasant revival of an old time custom."[27] Another report a few years later continues the association of quilting parties with the past: "An old fashioned quilting party was given Thursday by Mrs. Frank Smelser. As in ye olden times the guests were bidden to 'come early and stay all day.' A large number of old friends and neighbors were present and enjoyed of [sic] the hospitalities of the occasion."[28]

At nearly the same time quilting parties began to become parties

just for women, especially older women. In 1894, Mrs. Alex Walker of Farmer's Creek invited a few of the "pioneer ladies of this vicinity to a quilting party at her home."[29] Again in 1896, a large crowd came to a quilting at Holsworth's in honor of Mrs. Holsworth's sixtieth birthday.[30] A loss of interest in the quilting itself is perhaps reflected in the activities of a large party in honor of the sixty-third birthday of Mrs. Robert Hicks: "Carpet rags were taken in large bundles and tying quilts was one of the important parts of the day's work, two handsome and substantial quilts being completed."[31] The *Argus* noted that Miss Eva Buker "will entertain the young ladies of the community at a quilting."[32] Her party is exceptional because of the youth of her guests. It should also be noted that most of these events occurred in various rural districts, rather than in Red Cloud, the county seat. Even in an essentially rural area such as Webster County at the turn of the century there may have been differences between rural and "urban" customs.

There is very little evidence in the newspapers of organized, as opposed to social, quilting, especially in the 1880s and 1890s. In 1881, there was a notice that the Methodist Episcopal ladies would be quilting at Mrs. Frisbie's, in Red Cloud.[33] Women's church groups in Red Cloud seem to have preferred to raise money by giving "socials," which they did in great numbers and varieties. A correspondent for the small neighboring town of Guide Rock in the first few years of the twentieth century mentioned the doings of the church societies more often than any other reporters; although quilting is mentioned, it is only one of several activities, such as sewing for the poor, sewing carpet rags, and tying comforters, which these groups undertook. In 1905 the representatives of the three church sewing societies of Guide Rock met and agreed on a price for tying comforters: fifty cents each.[34] But as late as 1912 a correspondent from Batin precinct mentioned that the Ladies Aid had recently completed a quilt.[35]

The lack of notices and announcements may be because the quilting groups met so regularly that the papers felt no more need to announce them than to announce that the stores had opened for business that day. However, when the *Argus* ran a brief story on the Ladies Aid of Harvard, Nebraska, which proclaimed that they had

finished their one hundredth quilt and over a period of seven years had earned $1,449.19 by their quilting and by church socials, there was no local followup. Normally the local papers were quick to "boost" Webster County by pointing out similiar feats done locally; this silence suggests that, if there was quilting done by organized groups, their records could not compare with Harvard's. By contrast, a quick scan of the newspapers in the mid-1920s revealed regular announcements of quilting meetings by Ladies Aid and Willing Workers groups.

Women in the towns did organize, particularly as winter drew near, to do sewing for charity which may have included making quilts or comforters. I have found only one record of a meeting where this was done; a correspondent from Inavale, a smaller town west of Red Cloud, reported that "The Ladies Aid Society of this place, Auxiliary to the Home for the Friendless [an orphanage in Lincoln], met one afternoon last week and though there were only eight present they pieced one comforter and tied two and sent them next day to the Home, to keep the children warm these cold winter nights."[36] It is interesting to note that piecing as well as quilting was done by these groups. Not much is known or reported in quilt histories, of group-made quilts other than friendship or presentation quilts, which were usually set together by one person from donated blocks.

Individuals who quilted for others are also hard to find. There are advertisements by women announcing that they would do plain sewing, which may have included some parts of the quiltmaking process. One woman in the town of Bladen in northern Webster County, advertised that "those wishing comforts tied or quilting done, call on Mrs. Mary McCoy."[37] It may be that women who quilted for others were known and had no need to advertise.

Generally we think of quilts as being made by women for themselves and their families. It was therefore surprising to find quilts mentioned occasionally in commercial contexts. A sale of a hotel's furnishings in 1883 listed comforters, quilts, and spreads among the items to be sold;[38] it is possible they were made by the hotel-keeper's wife, but they also may have been bought commercially. In 1895, the sheriff was authorized to buy six quilts for the county jail.[39] During the hard times of the early 1890s, after several years of drought

and crop failures and the economic distress following the nationwide Panic of 1893, the *Argus* commended the plan of some merchants in Superior, a town in neighboring Nuckolls County; they proposed to have quilts, comforts, shirts, and other ready-made goods in their stores made by deserving poor families in town, in order to assist the poor and keep the money within the community.[40] This suggests that quilts and comforters had been bought commercially outside the community to be sold retail, but it is unclear whether all commercially sold quilts were factory made. Comforters were sold through the mail order houses also; Sears Roebuck's 1902 catalog carried them at prices ranging from $.47 to $1.98. A dry goods house in Red Cloud offered a line of comforters at prices ranging from $.40 to $1.25. They also advertised "a few home-made knotted comforters, extra large size, equal to two factory ones;"[41] so it may be that someone in Webster County made comforters to sell.

References to outstanding quilts virtually cease by the turn of the century, evidence, perhaps, of the decline in the respect given quilts. On the other hand, references to comforters and bedspreads rise. In the 1890s, quilts were sufficiently valued to make noteworthy gifts; in 1892 the ladies of the Pleasant Grove church gave their minister's wife "an excellent present of two fine quilts;"[42] a correspondent noted that Mrs. McNew of Stillwater precinct gave her daughter Callie a quilt and pillows when she married in 1894.[43] But twelve years later, the parents of Percy Larrick gave their son a pair of blankets and some comforters when he married.[44] What makes this item especially significant is that the Larricks were a quilting family: Mrs Larrick had entertained at a quilting bee in 1899;[45] and her husband, D. H. Larrick, also made quilts.[46] If they did not give quilts it was not because they lacked the ability or desire to make them. It may be that fashion had made comforters more suitable for solemn occasions such as weddings than the everyday quilt.

The idea of comforters having more prestige than quilts seems strange to us now, although Cuesta Benberry has shown that quilting was at a low in prestige and popularity in the first decade of the twentieth century.[47] The advertisements of the dry goods stores in Red Cloud tend to support the idea that comforters may have been more valued than quilts, at least if there is a correlation between the

value of an object and the cost of the materials used in making it. Although many comforters were probably made of the same inexpensive calicoes that went into quilts, the materials that were advertised specifically for the making of comforters might cost twice as much as calico and muslin. Standard print calicoes were sold consistently for around 5 cents a yard, with specials bringing the price as low as 2 1/2 cents a yard. In 1885, Ducker's store advertised "Robe prints, nice large patterns for comforts, 5 cts worth 8 cts."[48] In 1898, the Miner Brothers store advertisement suggested "For the Fancy Comforts use . . . Silketene,"[49] though no price was listed. In 1901 Hadell's Cash Bargain House advertised ten cent cretonnes for seven cents a yard.[50]

Comforters needed more batting than quilts, which also increased their cost. Batting came in a wide range of prices and brands, usually from five to twenty cents each.[51] Mrs. Newhouse, who ran a dry goods and notions shop, advertised that she had "Cotton bats at 10 cents—Large Enough for full Comforter, 60 cents."[52]

The decline of interest in quilts has sometimes been attributed to the increased availability of machine-woven blankets. The evidence of the Webster County newspapers, though not conclusive, does not suggest that this was a major factor. Such a theory tends to presume that quilts were made primarily for warmth, and were made obsolete by blankets. Blankets could be cheap: in 1900, some were advertised for forty-seven cents;[53] in 1908, some could be bought for thirty-nine cents.[54] However, these were cotton blankets, usually gray, although some were white or tan, and measured fifty-six inches by seventy-six inches. They probably did not provide as much warmth, and certainly not as much color and decorative value, as quilts. Wool blankets, which would provide more warmth than cotton blankets, were much more expensive, ranging in price from $2.50 (on sale) to $10.00, which put them out of reach for many people.

The decorative function of quilts, however, apparently was being taken over by woven bedspreads. The Miner Brothers store advertised spreads ranging from $ .60 cents to $3.50, adding "See our special No. 6500 Fringed Quilt—a very handsome piece goods."[55] This appears to be a Marseilles-type coverlet, woven in imitation of quilting.[56] Bedspreads seem to have been considered more suitable for

gift-giving than blankets, as they show up on lists of wedding presents in the period 1900–1920 more often than blankets—or quilts, for that matter.

Fortunately for the quilt researcher, local advertising during the period 1890–1910 was usually very specific about the goods and prices in the stores. Advertising in the 1880s usually consisted of a standard "card" giving the name of the store and the types of goods sold, sometimes varied by announcements that new goods had arrived. During 1910–1920, illustrations took the place of text. The highly detailed content of the decades surrounding 1900 was probably the local stores' response to the competition of the mail order houses. Many editorial paragraphs exhorting Webster County residents to trade at home, to keep their money within the community, show that local merchants felt the pressure. Local merchants used newspaper advertisements with detailed lists of goods and prices to show their customers that they could compete with mail order house prices. The local ads often read like catalogs.

One ad shows clearly that the advertisements for calicoes were aimed at quilters: "Comforts—The approach of cold weather is nearing us every day. Now is a good time to get your quilts ready. We have both the calico and the cotton bats."[57] Dress goods were always a separate, and much more expensive, category. Calicoes were virtually the cheapest fabrics sold; even unbleached muslin sold consistently at five cents a yard, and apron check ginghams, which Jeannette Lasansky notes were frequently found on quilt backs in Pennsylvania,[58] seldom went below seven cents a yard. Barbara Brackman has called the period from 1890–1925 the era of the dark quilts;[59] over and over the Webster County ads feature "Dark Prints," "Nice Dark Styles," "Standard Prints/Dark Colors." Often the ads are more specific, featuring "indigo calico, black and white calico,. . . Turkey red black figured calico,"[60] or "blue and white, blue and red, red and white, red and black, dots, stripes, and figures;"[61] the ads even begin to mention brand names such as "Simpson Blacks and Greys, Garner's Red and Garnet."[62]

Once a quilt was completed, what public recognition could the maker expect for an outstanding example? Historians such as Marie

Webster and Patsy and Myron Orlofsky have described the institution of the county fair as a source of honor to the prizewinners, a place to show off skills and see new patterns for entrants and visitors alike.[63] However, the fair records in the newspapers of Webster County were suprisingly scanty; if quiltmakers wanted to see their names in the paper for winning prizes at the fair, they were likely to be disappointed. In the first place, the fair itself was some-what irregular, especially in the hard times of the early 1890s—one year the agricultural society didn't decide until early September that there would be a fair in early October. In the late 1890s, the fair was dropped completely in some years, and other devices such as an inter-state fair (to include neighboring counties in Kansas) and street fairs were adopted. By 1905, the county fair was so dead in Red Cloud that citizens of Bladen in the northwest part of the county formed the Webster County Fair Association. New fairgrounds were built at Bladen, and the fair has been held there ever since.

Even in the 1880s, when the fair was an important event in Red Cloud, there were problems. Apparently a fee was charged to enter an item for exhibit until 1889.[64] That same year the fair board decided not to charge an admission fee to the fairgrounds.[65] These fees may have kept those without much money away from the fair. Even those who did exhibit, however, were irritated by the failure of the fair board to pay the promised premiums to the prize winners; ten years later the *Chief* wrote that the new inter-state fair board had to contend against the reputation of past fairs when only a small percentage of the premiums awarded were paid.[66]

Perhaps even more disappointing than the lack of prize money may have been the lack of public recognition. Although the papers encouraged women to enter their handiwork to make the fair a success, and even though the leading women of Red Cloud were in the Ladies Auxiliary, in charge of Floral Hall where most women's entries were exhibited, often the most that would be said of their work was that Floral Hall was attractive. The papers would frequently promise to publish the lists of winners, but they seldom appeared; occasionally the editor would acknowledge that the premium list had been "crowded out" of the paper;[67] usually the editor made no

further mention of the matter. Sometimes just the male-oriented parts of the prize list appeared: the livestock and agricultural lists and the results of the horse racing.

The prize lists that were published, however, do serve to give partial glimpses of what was considered notable at scattered intervals. The crazy quilts and embroidered quilts which won prizes for Mrs. Douglas Terry, Mrs. W. Cook, and Mrs. Brewer, at the fair in 1884, have already been mentioned.[68] In 1894 Mable Bailey won a gingham dress donated by a merchant for the best patchwork by a little girl; according to the 1900 census, Mable would have been about 13 at the time. In 1895 Mrs. E. B. Goble and Mrs. McKeighan (the wife of a former Congressman) took prizes for the best quilt as judged by the quilting; Mrs. M. A. Wolf and Mrs. L. H. Rust won for best pieced worsted quilts.[69] In 1913, Mrs. George Worley, Mrs. Myrtle Cather (wife of Willa Cather's cousin), and Mrs. S. C. True took prizes for patchwork cotton quilts; Mrs. S. C. True also took a first for her silk patchwork quilt; and Ethel Fulton and Lulu Baker won for their patchwork sofa pillows.[70] Although the Bladen paper did not publish any more prize lists before 1920 that include quilts, a later issue does give a rare glimpse of the appearance of quilts at the county fair in 1920, when it mentioned that "Quilts and comforts were suspended from the ceiling."[71]

The decline of quiltmaking in Webster County is most graphically demonstrated in the coverage of a new institution in Webster County, the Farmers Institutes. Beginning as a lecture series on agricultural and domestic issues in 1909, the Institutes quickly came to feature displays of agricultural and domestic products, with prizes, very much in the manner of the fairs. The Red Cloud *Chief* published full page premium lists and reported the names of all winners of prizes: seventy-five cents for first and fifty cents for second place. In addition to a dauntingly long list of other forms of needlework, which shows the fashionable competition for women's time, there were several categories of quilts in 1911: silk pieced quilts, cotton pieced quilts, wool pieced quilts, best display of quilting, and the quilt with the largest number of pieces. The inclusion of silk quilts is interesting; most of the silk quilts found by the Nebraska Quilt

Project are nineteenth century show quilts or crazy quilts; early twentieth century silk quilts are very rare.

A separate division, for women over sixty, had only two categories: log cabin quilts and a prize for the oldest quilt made within the owner's lifetime. The association of log cabin quilts with older women is especially interesting; log cabin quilts would have been popular in the youth of these women, the period 1860–1880. In fact, log cabin quilts remained as part of the premium list for women over sixty through the 1920s.[72] However, there is no mention at all of applique work, which had also been popular in the third quarter of the nineteenth century.

The published lists of winners in all departments make a valuable source of names of quilters active in the county. Recurring names in a category signal women who were especially proficient at certain kinds of work: Sarah Brooks, for example, won prizes for her log cabin quilts in several years. Especially interesting are the names of several Czech women: Mrs. Polnicky, wife of a Red Cloud saloonkeeper, won first prize for the best wool pieced quilt in 1911;[73] Mrs Louis Vavricka took second place for wool pieced quilts in 1913,[74] and Mrs. Kralik took first place in cotton pieced quilts that same year.

Two other categories show additional uses for patchwork. Cuesta Benberry has described the vogue for sofa pillows which arose at the turn of the century.[75] These were still fashionable in Red Cloud in the teens; contestants could enter silk pieced pillows, as well as pillows with cross-stitch, hardanger, embroidery, or novelty decorations. Patchwork was also used to teach young girls how to sew; for several years beginning in 1913, there was a prize for the best quilt patches by a girl under ten years of age.

In 1914, quilts were dropped entirely from the regular needlework department of the Institutes.[76] The association of quiltmaking with older women had been made official. Women over sixty could still enter log cabin quilts, or compete for the prize for the oldest quilt made within the owner's lifetime (although there were few prizes given in this category, suggesting that few quilts were entered). Perhaps there was not enough interest in quilts among younger women

to warrant keeping quilts in the regular needlework department; in some years only one prize was awarded in some of the categories, which suggests that there had been only one entry. Or when the same woman took both first and second prizes in a category, one wonders how much competition she actually had. In 1916, the list of categories for women over sixty was expanded to include cotton pieced quilts, although only one prize was given—again, perhaps because there was only one entrant. Not until 1920 did the list expand to include silk and wool quilts again, as well as a prize for best hand-quilted quilt; all, of course, for women over sixty. For a few years there was still a prize for quilt patches by girls under ten, dominated by girls of the Coon family, but that category was dropped in 1917.

The shufflings of premium lists do not, in themselves, prove what the attitudes were toward quiltmaking in this period. Fortunately, Webster County has a unique source of information concerning the lives of its people: the stories of Willa Cather. Cather was a great artist who was also a keen observer; she drew upon her memories of people and events in the Webster County of her girlhood, and her observations of the area as she returned periodically to visit her parents, to create some of her greatest novels.[77] The role which quilts play—or do not play—in her stories serves as a crosscheck to the more impersonal newspaper records, for Cather is concerned with objects as they represent the values and associations of her characters.

In *My Antonia* (1918), for example, the alien nature of Antonia's immigrant family is represented, for their American-born neighbors, by their feather quilt, as Jim Burden, the narrator, calls it; now we would be more likely to call it a comforter or even a feather bed. Used to the thin cotton quilts of nineteenth century America, the billowy feather "quilt" seems as strange to the neighbors as the uses to which Mrs. Shimerda puts it, as a potholder and warming oven to keep coffee cakes and roast goose warm. "The story got about that the Shimerdas kept their food in their feather beds."[78] The achievement of the Czech women who won prizes at the county fair is the more remarkable when placed in this context.

More conventional quilts serve to represent the warmth of home to heroines who must leave home; both Thea Kronberg in *The Song*

of the Lark (1915) and Lesley Fergusson in "The Best Years" (1941) sleep in little attic bedrooms (based on Cather's own room in Red Cloud), where they lie snug under heavy quilts as the snow sifts in through gaps between the shingles of the roof.

On the other hand, the absence of conventional quilts underscores the special qualities of heroines such as Nelly Deane in "The Joy of Nelly Deane" (1912) and the fascinating Marian Forrester in *A Lost Lady* (1923). Nelly, a petted only child, is the only girl in town to have a white counterpane and a white fur rug in her bedroom. The prestige of the white bedspread is shown even more clearly in *A Lost Lady*, where a white coverlet graces the bed of Captain and Mrs. Forrester, the wealthiest and most aristocratic residents of Sweet Water, Nebraska. When young Neil Herbert is brought into the room after falling from a tree and breaking his arm, to await the doctor, he contrasts the elegant room with its white bed and walnut furniture with his own shabby home.

O Pioneers! (1913) helps to document the relegation of quiltmaking to the old (and, by extension, the old fashioned). The heroine, Alexandra Bergson, takes charge of the family farm while still in her teens, and makes it a success by her love of the land and her willingness to try new ideas in farming. Independent and progressive as she is, she still values the past. Every winter she invites old Mrs. Lee, her brother's Norwegian mother-in-law, to visit her so that Mrs. Lee can enjoy doing things in the old ways: speaking Norwegian instead of English, wearing nightcaps, taking baths without having to use the new bathtub, and piecing and quilting.[79] Nowhere else in the novel is there any indication that Alexandra makes quilts; it is simply one of the old-fashioned things she does with old Mrs. Lee. The quiltmaking affirms Alexandra's value for the past, but it also affirms that quilts were considered things of the past. Interestingly enough, Mrs. Lee herself values her newly-made cross-stitch apron more, taking it to show off to a neighbor.

One of Ours (1922) reveals most dramatically the attitudes toward quilts in Webster County in the pre-World War I period. The hero, Claude Wheeler, was inspired by Cather's cousin, Grosvenor Cather, who was killed in the war, and many other characters have prototypes among Webster County people. The hired girl in Claude's

father's family is old Mahailey, a character based on Marjorie Anderson, who served Cather's parents nearly all her life. Mahailey had brought with her to Nebraska three quilts made by her mother back in Virginia: a log cabin quilt, a Laurel Leaf, and a masterpiece Blazing Star. For years she had hidden them away, knowing that Claude's grasping and up-to-date family would have no use for them except for horse-blankets. Mahailey has been saving the quilts to give to Claude, knowing that he is the only one who cares about her, the only one who is searching for values that are not utterly materialistic.[80] Unfortunately, Claude's wife is the frigid Enid, whose only desire is to be a missionary in China. The fate of the quilts after Claude's death in the war is left untold. The novel thus contains a scathing picture of the greed and materialism, the lack of respect for traditional values and ways of doing things, which Cather saw as pervading American life. The quilts represent a way of creating beauty and order out of the humble materials of life, the beauty and order that Claude tries vainly to find in his life.

Cather's novels help to verify some of the conclusions drawn from the newspapers of Webster County, showing as they do that quiltmaking in this community, in the early twentieth century, was associated with older women and with traditional ways of doing things. Her novels and stories show the greater prestige attached to the white bedspread or coverlet; they also show how quilts, even old family quilts, were of little value to people who considered themselves modern.

The newspapers show what kinds of quilts were valued in the last decades of the nineteenth century, such as the silk and crazy quilts, and quilts with commemorative functions such as some outline embroidered quilts. The records also show how the value was expressed: not only in the fundraising, friendship, and presentation quilts about which much has been written elsewhere, but also in quilts used as prizes and wedding gifts. Reading the matter-of-fact mentions of more everyday quiltmaking also shows how much quilts were part of women's lives: part of their work, part of their philanthropic activities, perhaps even part of their household shopping, as well as part of their recreation and social life. Changes in the participants and

nature of the quilting party become apparent, as first the men and then the younger women drop out or are dropped.

The newspapers show us the materials quiltmakers had to work with and their costs; they also show us the competition quilts faced as useful objects—from comforts, blankets, and bedspreads—and the competition which quiltmaking faced as an activity from other forms of needlework, as shown in the long lists of needlework premiums at the fair. The newspapers record the names of many quilters, most of them considered outstanding in some way, whose names would have been lost otherwise.

To most appearances, quiltmaking in Webster County in 1920 was a dying craft, practiced only by a few older women, no longer even taught to beginning sewers. Elsewhere the revival of interest in antiques and "Colonial" objects and handicrafts had helped foster a revival of interest in quiltmaking; the national women's magazines in the urban centers of the east had begun to praise "grandmother's quilts."[81] Marie Webster and Carrie Hall agreed that the revival had begun about 1915 or before,[82] about the same time it was discarded from the premium lists in Webster County. Perhaps other local studies will reveal whether the revival came earlier to areas (such as urban centers) where quiltmaking had been old-fashioned long enough to have become quaint rather than dowdy, as it may have become in rural areas.

Clearly the new fashion for quiltmaking came later to Webster County, but when it came, there was no need for revival: quiltmaking had never been dead, just ignored, since it was practiced by the very young and very old. A correspondent from Batin precinct reported that "the Ladies' Aid quilted a quilt for Maudie Duval last Thursday. She says she will have another one ready to quilt on her seventh birthday. She does the sewing herself."[83] Some years later the *Argus* reprinted an article from the *Nebraska State Journal* concerning a Bladen woman, Nancy Garloch, aged ninety-nine; the article ended, "She delights in quilting, and in spite of her failing eyesight, often assists her daughters or granddaughters in their quilting work."[84] Women and girls like these kept quilting alive in Webster County, to flower in the 1920s and 1930s.

Without the newspapers, we should not have known about most of these women. Relatively few of the quilters mentioned in the papers are represented in the Nebraska Quilt Project's Red Cloud survey data. Families move away or die out, quilts wear out, and memories fade. More work needs to be done by researchers in other localities to see how they compare with the patterns which the Webster County records demonstrate. When that is done we may be able to see the ebbs and flows of quiltmaking across the different areas of the country, and understand better what the quiltmakers were doing and why. The records provided by the newspapers, scanty or tantalizing as they sometimes are, preserve for us what may be the only contemporary records of many of the hitherto anonymous quiltmakers of the past.

Notes and References

1. Jeannette Lasansky, *In the Heart of Pennsylvania: 19th and 20th Century Quiltmaking Traditions* (Lewisburg, PA: Oral Traditions Project, 1985), 59.
2. Webster County *Argus* (Red Cloud, NE), October 15, 1885. This paper will be cited as *Argus* hereafter.
3. Red Cloud *Chief* (Red Cloud, NE), Sept 19, 1884. This paper will be cited as *Chief* hereafter.
4. *Chief*, May 8, 1884.
5. *Daily Evening Chief* (Red Cloud, NE), December 29, 1887.
6. *Chief*, February 22, 1884.
7. Virginia Gunn, "Crazy Quilts and Outline Quilts: Popular Responses to the Decorative Art/Art Needlework movement, 1876–1893," *Uncoverings 1984*, ed. Sally Garoutte (Mill Valley, CA: American Quilt Study Group, 1985), 140.
8. *Chief*, September 26, 1884.
9. *Argus*, October 22, 1886.
10. *Argus*, February 7, 1889.
11. *The Nation* (Red Cloud), August 28, 1902.
12. *Nation*, December 29, 1903.
13. *Chief*, September 23, 1892.
14. *Argus*, January 30, 1896.
15. *Chief*, September 26, 1884.
16. *Daily Evening Chief*, December 29, 1887.

17. *Daily Evening Chief*, December 27, 1887.
18. *Argus*, November 20, 1890.
19. *Argus*, May 7, 1885.
20. *Argus*, March 14, 1902.
21. *Argus*, December 23, 1886.
22. Virginia Gunn, "Quilts at Nineteenth Century State and County Fairs: An Ohio Study," *Uncoverings 1988*, ed. Laurel Horton (Mill Valley, CA: American Quilt Study Group, 1989), 117.
23. *Chief*, Sept 22, 1881.
24. See Janet Carruth and Lorene Sinema, "Emma M. Andres and Her Six Grand Old Characters," *Uncoverings 1990*, ed. Laurel Horton (Mill Valley, CA: American Quilt Study Group, 1991), 88–108, for a discussion of some twentieth century male quilters and the challenges they set themselves.
25. *Chief*, January 15, 1880.
26. *Argus*, October 26, 1893.
27. *Argus*, February 1, 1894.
28. *Argus*, August 8, 1896.
29. *Argus*, October 18, 1894.
30. *The Golden Belt* (Red Cloud, NE), March 13, 1896.
31. *Argus*, October 5, 1900.
32. *Argus*, August 3, 1900.
33. *Argus*, December 1, 1881.
34. *Nation*, October 5, 1905.
35. *Argus*, March 29, 1912.
36. *Argus*, January 28, 1886.
37. *The Bladen Enterprise*, November 5, 1915, and subsequent issues for a month.
38. *Argus*, July 5, 1883.
39. *Chief*, December 6, 1895.
40. *Argus*, November 15, 1894.
41. *Argus*, September 21, 1900.
42. *Chief*, September 23, 1892.
43. *Argus*, November 1, 1894.
44. *The Bladen Enterprise*, September 11, 1908.
45. *Argus*, March 3, 1899.
46. See Kari Ronning, " 'Love was in the Work:' Pieced Quilts," in *Nebraska Quilts and Quiltmakers*, ed. Patricia Cox Crews and Ronald C. Naugle (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1991), 52–53, for a picture of one of the quilts made by D. H. Larrick.

47. Cuesta Benberry, "The 20th Century's First Quilt Revival," *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine* (July/August 1979), 20–22.
48. *Argus*, November 12, 1886.
49. *Chief*, August 19, 1898.
50. *Argus*, June 1, 1900.
51. Miner Brothers' advertisement, *Argus*, October 5, 1900.
52. *Chief*, February 8, 1907.
53. Miner Brothers advertisement, *Argus*, September 21, 1900.
54. New York Store advertisement, *The Commercial Advertiser* (Red Cloud), September 21, 1908.
55. *Argus*, May 19, 1899.
56. The Sears Roebuck Catalog (1902; rpt. New York: Crown, 1969), describes many of its bedspreads as being Marseilles spreads.
57. *Chief*, August 19, 1898.
58. Jeannette Lasansky, "The Typical Versus the Unusual/Distortions of Time," *In the Heart of Pennsylvania: Symposium Papers* (Lewisburg, PA: Oral Traditions Project, 1987), 61.
59. Barbara Brackman, *Clues in the Calico: A Guide to Identifying and Dating Antique Quilts* (McLean VA: EPM Publications, 1989), 159–60.
60. *Argus*, October 25, 1894.
61. *Argus*, May 11, 1900.
62. *Argus*, September 21, 1900.
63. Marie Webster, *Quilts: Their Story and How to Make Them* (1915; New York: Tudor, 1948), 138; Patsy and Myron Orlofsky, *Quilts in America* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), 55–58.
64. *The Republican* (Red Cloud), September 20, 1889.
65. *Argus*, September 12, 1889.
66. *Chief*, September 15, 1899.
67. *Argus*, October 18, 1883.
68. *Chief*, September 25, 1884.
69. *Argus*, October 24, 1895.
70. *Bladen Enterprise*, October 31, 1913; November 7, 1913.
71. *Bladen Enterprise*, September 2, 1920.
72. *Argus*, October 18, 1928.
73. *Chief*, December 28, 1911.
74. *Chief*, November 20, 1913.
75. Benberry, 20.
76. *Chief*, November 5, 1914. The information in this paragraph is drawn from the premium lists published in both the *Chief* and the *Argus*, usually in

November, in the years 1914–1917 and 1919–1920; there was no Farmers Institute in 1918 because of the war.

77. See Mildred Bennett, *The World of Willa Cather* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1961); and James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1987), for discussions of the Nebraska roots of Cather's novels. Evelyn Haller, "Cather and Women's Art," *Nebraska Humanist* 10, (1989): 73–89, discusses quilts in Cather's life and novels in the context of Cather's respect for the way women could make an art out of the activities of everyday life: keeping house, cooking, gardening, needlework.
78. Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), 139.
79. Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 189.
80. Willa Cather, *One of Ours* (New York: Knopf, 1922), 72–73.
81. Jeannette Lasansky, "The Colonial Revival," *Pieced by Mother* (Lewisburg, PA: Oral Traditions Project, 1987), 105.
82. Webster, 8; Carrie Hall and Rose Kretsinger, *Romance of the Patchwork Quilt in America* (1935; New York: Bonanza, n. d.), 17.
83. *Argus*, March 29, 1912.
84. *Argus*, March 10, 1921.