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Southwestern Quilts and Quiltmakers in Context

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In 1985, the Museum of International Folk Art, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, commissioned a survey of living traditional quiltmakers. The survey focused (as does this paper) on the oral histories of rural women living in New Mexico who had learned to quilt from relatives or friends—not from workshops, videos, or manuals. Prior to the author's arrival in New Mexico, news releases detailing the scope and time constraints of the project were sent out statewide. We made contact with all who responded to the request, securing recommendations for additional informants from over fifty quilt guilds, senior citizen centers, and historical societies.

We spoke by telephone to more than two hundred women and based on their responses, we visited quilting groups in Roswell, Carlsbad, Hobbs, Lovington, Portales, and Clovis, as well as individuals living at or near Gallup, Kirtland, Farmington, Aztec, Chama, Arroyo Seco, Hatch, Las Cruces, Deming, Quemado, San Patricio, Artesia, Albuquerque, Mosquero, and Solano. The quilters were primarily Anglo- and Hispanic-American women. We met only one African-American, and we purchased the work of one Navajo. (Many of the informants, however, had some American Indian ancestry.) Most of the quiltmakers were raised in Texas (28), New Mexico (19), Oklahoma (14), or Arkansas (5), and were older women, with one exception. Many were Baptists, Mormons, Roman Catholics, Methodists, or Presbyterians. We made an extensive photographic record of the quiltmakers and their quilts.

This paper organizes and examines some of the stories told by these Southwestern women: of personal circumstance; quilting frames; fabric, thread and batting sources; and describes how their beds were made and

viewed. Since the quilters spoke to us within the physical context of their homes, ranches, or places of recreation—often beside their quilts—their oral histories establish resonance on community, place, and purpose. The paper presents a picture of quiltmaking from the time when the frontier/homesteading experience merged with that of the Great Depression, when the means to create bedcoverings was very limited but the need was great. The results are often quite unlike those of rural traditional quiltmakers of like age and of the same era back East—in Pennsylvania, where the author has done similar research. Contrasts between the two areas are noted where pertinent.

> *Some people oil paint, some piece quilts, some do stained glass, some people make bundt cakes. It's a matter of expression I think.*
> —Loyce Wood Sage of Gallup, New Mexico, June 28, 1985

Twenty years ago Patricia Cooper and Norma Bradley Buferd began a series of trips back to their native Southwest in order to meet and interview older traditional quiltmakers in Texas and New Mexico. As part of the process Cooper and Buferd also photographed the makers and their quilts in their homes, on their ranches, and at their senior citizen centers "in an attempt to establish resonances."[1] In 1977 some of these photographs and much of what the quiltmakers said, along with some of the authors' impressions, were assembled in the watershed book, *The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art.* The cumulative body of information found in *The Quilters* provides the reader with a clear sense of the quiltmakers' community, place, and purpose.[2]

The authors, Cooper and Buferd, had been inspired to set out on their task after viewing the Whitney exhibition in 1971, which emphasized the design aesthetics of American quilts.[3] *The Quilters* in turn has inspired others to look at and secure oral sources as an important, if not essential, part of the history of women's domestic art—particularly as it pertains to twentieth-century material culture.[4]

In 1985 I was offered the opportunity to visit some of the territory covered earlier by Cooper and Buferd.[5] I was invited by the Museum of International Folk Art to conduct a study of New Mexi-

can traditional quiltmaking based on two aspects of my previous work with the Oral Traditions Project: 1) the study of historical quilts and 2) major research projects that featured significant oral history/ oral tradition components.[6] In retrospect, the assignment provided me was more than I bargained for—not only a summer in a part of the country I had never visited with a distinct geography and climate, but also an intense look at the lives and material culture within a frontier setting, a focus on quilts of the twentieth century, and the opportunity to contrast these findings with those from back East. This paper gathers, sorts, and presents stories told by the practitioners I was so fortunate to meet and interview. My thoughts about the women and their quilts, tempered by the experiences of an intervening eight years, will act as a postscript.

My co-worker, Nora Pickens of Santa Fe, and I spent nearly two months making contact with over two hundred quilters and fifty museums, historical societies, and quilt guilds.[7] Of ninety-four quiltmakers we talked with by phone or in person, twenty-three were selected, based on their personal histories and initial responses, for in-depth tape-recorded interviews. (The fully indexed tapes are housed in the collection of the Museum of International Folk Art.) From our fieldwork a picture emerged of quiltmaking at a time when the frontier/homesteading experience merged with that of the Great Depression, when the means to create bed coverings was very limited but the need was very great, and when aspects of quiltmaking were truly scrap—their batting, thread, linings, and tops.

This paper will present in the quiltmakers' own words their living circumstances, cultural attitudes including the effect the objects had on the women who made them. The informants quoted here are Margrette Foutz Baumgardner and Loyce Wood Sage of Gallup, Yvonne Bunnell Didde of Kirtland, Mable Otis Head of Farmington, Mildred Whaley McDonnell of Las Cruces, Vera Marida Reynolds Medling of Chama, Addie Bernice Stevens Jouett of Clovis, and Nellie Austin Morrison Randleman of Aztec. Although these women all resided in New Mexico in 1985, many of them had come as children or young women from Texas (28), Oklahoma (14), or Arkansas (5), and their needlework choices and attitudes were formed by traditions there as well. Therefore, these interviews reflect quilt-

Figure 1. Mable Otis Head of Farmington with one of her many variations of *Trip Around the World*. Several of her quilts are now in the collection of the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe. All photos were taken in June/July 1985 by Jeannette Lasansky or Nora Pickens.

making traditions, not just in New Mexico, but of other southwestern states.

I have organized the quiltmakers' observations and experiences in the following categories: family circumstance; the quilting frame; fabric, batting, and thread sources; and how one made the bed. Their words are largely unedited.

Circumstance

Many of the women interviewed came to New Mexico with their parents in search of better living conditions. Their families were impoverished by bad weather, poor growing conditions elsewhere, and the economic forces of the Great Depression. They grew up in what a contemporary Easterner like myself might call "frontier conditions." Mable Head recalled that her family ran a trading post in northwestern New Mexico:

My folks more or less went broke in Farmington. Times got hard and my father lost all his property and so he homesteaded. He started a trading post. . . . In fact when the Depression was on, the Oklahoma people went west and some got even as far as the trading post and they didn't have any money to pay for food or gas and they would even quilt to pay for a gallon or two of gas to get into Farmington.[8]

Two informants had lived in sod or box houses. Vera Medling, who was reared in Marmaduke, Arkansas, said that as a youngster in the teens, "We burned wood before we would go out at night and you would freeze if you did not have lots of cover because back then we did not have good houses. We had mostly just box houses."[9]

The term "box" house was new to me but I soon could visualize one with the help of Loyce Sage who had gone to school in Lubbock, Texas, but who had grown up in Quemado, New Mexico, where she homesteaded with her mother and lived in a "box" house:

[The boards] were rough with the prints of the saw on them. The walls were made out of boxing boards. They were twelve inches and over every crack was stripped [covered] with what we call "rough-edge." (When they put a log through the sawmill, the first cut off was called a "slab"—[it] had bark all over it. . . . two or three cuts would have bark just on the edge. They were called "rough-edge"). To cover the cracks [of the boxing boards], there's rough-edge over every crack, and you tried to turn it so that it would cup in against the boxing board wall. We had rough-edge floor and over the years it got smooth. We scrubbed it smooth but it was [made of] rough-edge too. The roof had no ceiling. The roof slanted to the back and had tarpaper on it. And then we papered the walls with slick-paper magazines and behind the heater we had a whole article about alfalfa and lespedeza, and when you were cold, you sat there and read. . . . [The house] was ten feet by twenty-four feet and we bought it secondhand, of course, and we took it apart and hauled it on a wagon over there [to Quemado] and put it back together. Enough boards got broke—busted in place—[that] it was two feet shorter when we put it back up. It was [then] ten feet by twenty-two feet. There were five people who lived in it. . . . There was Uncle Bud, Uncle Ruhl, and mama and us three kids. . . . Then we built a room out of rocks for Uncle Bud and Uncle Ruhl so we had lots more room. . . . In the ten by twenty-two room we had a cook stove, the cabinet and washstand at one end; a table, and then you hung the quilt. You couldn't get around it if you got an eight foot quilting frame and the room is ten feet wide. You didn't

> have much room, so we raised it up to cook or whatever. You couldn't have many things in there. . . . Our house had just one window and mama always had unbleached muslin or flour sack curtains and she always put gingham around them or embroidery or whatever and they were bright. And then we had a dresser. It always had a bright-colored dresser scarf, crocheted or embroidered or whatever. Of course we always ate on a tablecloth. Back then everybody did. We always had bright-colored tablecloths. But that was all that there could be in there because by the time you got the people in there, the bed and cook stove and heater, *and* the sewing machine, the room was full.[10]

The Quilting Frame

The prominence of quiltmaking in the lives of these informants was not apparent by glancing at their beds but rather when looking up at their ceilings. In many homes, like Mary Wasson's in Hatch, there were four hooks permanently secured to the ceiling for the sole purpose of hanging a full-sized quilting frame. Quilting, while in progress, would indeed have been a dominant presence as these suspended frames took up much of the room in which they hung—unlike the much smaller, though still prominent, ratcheted floor models that I was accustomed to seeing back home.

All of the informants used simple quilt frames formed of four lengths of wood that were slightly longer than the dimensions of their finished quilts. The lengths were secured to each other, and the sandwich of fabric was attached to the frame by sewing into holes or to an attached length of cloth with pins or tacks. The frame was suspended from permanent hooks in the ceiling and when in use was sometimes steadied by fastening it to chair backs. Loyce remarked:

> Somebody's husband, uncle or grandpa made everybody's frame. They made them out of strips of wood and then bored round holes clear through every two inches on each end for two or three feet. Then you put your frame together. You put one across another and you dropped a big nail in the matching holes and that's what held it together. We didn't have nice things like C clamps and things like that. Sometimes, if it was a heavy quilt, you hung your quilt from the ceiling with binder

Figure 2. Elsie Dallas Bloomfield on her front porch and beside her garden in Farmington with her *Churn Dash* quilt which is now in the collection of the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe.

> twine and you took that and tied the ends of the quilting frame together to hold it good and tight. . . . Everybody had hooks in the ceiling. . . . You wrapped the string that hung from the ceiling around the end of the quilt frame and raised it up so you could walk under it 'til you got ready to quilt and then you just unrolled it and let it out.[11]

None of the women had used a ratchet-style floor frame until recently and some never have. The latter is the prevalent frame type in Pennsylvania now. Examples of these floor frames are mentioned in nineteenth-century estate inventories there. Many variations are seen frequently at current estate sales or vendues. Men made these frames for their female relatives and friends even after the 1930s when they became available from mail order catalog companies like Sears, Roebuck. There is no tradition of ceiling hooks in Pennsylvania homes from which suspended a quilting frame of the pole variety. When such full-sized pole frames were used in Pennsylvania they were set up in a less-used room in the home, in a church space, or sometimes on the threshing floor of a barn—often supported by

four chair backs. Mid-nineteenth-century Pennsylvania farm houses were quite large and not as cramped as the box houses described by the southwestern women who were homesteading nearly a century later. Back East a floor frame could be left out until the task was done and probably not inconvenience the rest of the family. Loyce Sage never saw such a frame until the mid-1960s. Now they are, as often as not, the frame of choice of New Mexican quiltmakers.

Batting, Thread, and Fabric Sources

Accustomed to talking with traditional quiltmakers in Pennsylvania who used commercially made batting, I was surprised to find that it was until recently, the exception rather than the rule among these New Mexican informants. Homemade cotton batts were their dominant filling. Wool was used only in areas where sheep grazed—primarily in northern New Mexico—and generally, although not exclusively, for tied comforts rather than the thinner quilts.

Loyce used to pick wool caught on bushes from sheep and lambs being herded to the nearby Hubbell Trading Post: "[We] carried a burlap bag behind the saddle everywhere we went and if we saw a place where a whole bunch of sheep had been . . .then we'd stop and pick that and put it in our bag. Pretty soon you'd have enough wool to card and make a quilt."[12]

> On a homestead you had no cash crop. People weren't farmers. That's not farming country. All you had was a corn patch and what few cows one section would raise.[13] You didn't have any cash money. Our cash crop was cedar posts and a truck would come through the country and you had your cedar posts piled up against the fence. When the truck came through they bought your cedar posts. And that was all the cash you had except when you sold calves in the fall. . . . So we didn't order batts except for something very special. In 1936, I think it was, Sears, Roebuck put out a quilt contest in the catalog[14] and there were half a dozen women in Quemado that ordered a batt and did a quilt and sent it to the great quilt contest. They quilted themselves. They didn't let the neighbors quilt on it. . . . But we never ordered batts as long as I

was at home. We didn't have the money. What money we got went for flour and Bull Durham and coffee and sugar, matches, cola.[15]

All the other informants had carded their own small cotton batts, often eight inches long by three inches wide. The sources of cotton varied: the innards of mattresses or the gleanings from the local cotton gin—if you were fortunate. "Everybody had cards or the neighbor did and you borrowed the cards and if you had an old mattress . . .you took that and carded it into little batts and laid them in and quilted them. Nobody could afford batts. They probably did in some big towns where people had regular jobs or fixed income. Things like that we didn't have," reiterated Loyce.

> We just pulled the cotton out of an old mattress that had got lumpy and carded the batts and used them for quilts or if you needed to remake the mattress, you carded those batts, stood them upright, . . .tied together, and made a new mattress. That was as bad as cleaning the oven nowadays. The different grade cotton that they put in mattresses at that time were linty and had pieces of cottonseed and dust and—look, I'm rubbing my nose! I can remember it 'til now. We went under a tree and carded those and laid them over in a washtub or basket because you couldn't do it in the house. The dust and the lint from the cotton was just too much.[16]

A forty-five-pound mattress might yield enough batting for thirty quilts.[17]

Vera Medling's father saved one hundred pounds of cotton every fall for the family's quiltmakers and "When it was ginned [my mother] would bring it home and lay it on the floor and we would beat it with switches and make it fluffy and that is what we would put in our quilts."[18] Addie Jouett remembers her mother getting small amounts of cotton from the gin where her Uncle Seth worked: "If any blowed out of the wagon or anything, why, anybody could go out and pick it up."[19] In fact Addie did not use a commercially made batting until in the early 1980s. Besides carding their own batts, most of these informants also used sheet blankets and had quilted over an old quilt at least once in their lives.

Frugality extended to the saving of thread from sacks, as related by Margrette Baumgardner when she discussed setting up their quilt-

ing frame, "We sewed them [the quilts] with twine we saved from flour sacks, sugar sacks, or whatever. We'd roll that up and save it and we'd sew the quilt on."[20]

Sack material was commonly used for many Depression-era quilts all over the United States. It was the fabric of choice for most homemakers in the Southwest until recently. Yvonne Didde observed:

> The one store we would buy at would have flour stacked maybe five or six feet high and maybe a short wall eight or ten feet. If there was a particular print that my grandmother wanted we moved flour until we got to the [right] sacks. . . . Because we did not go weekly to shop you would buy as many as six fifty-pound bags of flour at a time, and because you didn't go often, if you didn't get the fabrics that matched, you might not have them available the next time. . . . I remember my grandfather and my older cousin moving flour and I don't remember them complaining about it. I don't remember them being over joyous that they had to move three hundred pounds of flour to get to the particular sack we wanted but he wasn't grumpy about it or saying "Let's hurry up, we've got other things to do." When you went to town with my grandmother at that time, it was an all-day affair.[21]

Similar stories were related again and again—of flour sacks being moved to get to the desired fabric. As Loyce Sage recalled:

> Everybody used feed sacks. Nearly all the quilts, the back was either unbleached muslin or pieced out of flour sacks or feed sacks. . . . Tobacco sacks were like thin flour sacks and they were rectangular after you ripped them apart—about 8 inches long by 3 1/2 inches wide, when you finished with them. You ripped them and washed them and if you dyed half of them, why you could make them into brick work or some type basket weave pattern. Mine was half red and half white; my sister's was half blue, half white; Uncle Lou's was brown and yellow, and my brother's was green and white.[22]

Indeed, a great proportion of the quilts we saw were strip quilts made with various sack material. The sashing on the quilts was always narrow and borders nonexistent.

Fabric was not abundantly available to everyone in rural areas—even as late as the 1960s according to Yvonne:

> My mother sewed a lot for me and my sisters and I really don't remember going to this fabric shop and that fabric shop and being able to jump from shop to shop to choose fabrics to wear, for clothes. So, if there weren't the variety of fabrics for dressmaking, there wouldn't have been the variety to make quilts. When I was young and my grandmother used a lot of flour sacks and there were some cottons available but when we would go to the shop with my grandmother you were talking maybe a selection of a dozen or twenty bolts. There may have been several muslin bolts or white bolts . . . and probably far less in calicos. There were always plenty of bolts of chambray fabric that she would buy and make work shirts and things like that, but not necessarily a wide variety of calicos.[23]

Most recalled ordering fabric from catalogs rather than going to stores. "We had Montgomery Ward and Sears, Roebuck catalogs. That was all we had," said Loyce Sage. She said:

> You put in an order and you could get it back within two weeks because the mail just ran three times a week . . . print calico was 128 by 128 thread, which was real nice material, and it would cost nineteen cents a yard or so, and then they had lawn cloth, seersucker, plisse, crepe in cottons, and maybe they'd have one place where you could order silk. Nobody ever ordered it for quilts because it wasn't practical. Nobody bought material for making quilts. Nobody could afford to back then. That was in the Depression and all those people homesteaded and were just strictly on subsistence so you used scraps. You could, by looking at the scraps, see which ones were extroverts and introverts. . . . In the Sears, Roebuck catalog they had a bundle. They had "good," "better," and "best," and the "better" one you got ten yards of material for seventy-nine cents, and that was the one we always ordered. You got one four-yard piece and two three-yard pieces and my mother was bigger [and got the four-yard piece for making a dress] and my sister and I got the two three-yard pieces. That was very exciting to wonder what kind it was going to be and what color. Whatever it came that's what we had. A bright blue print, fine. If it was bright red or orchid or whatever, you took what came, and it was ten yards for seventy-nine cents. I always preferred red. . . . My sister liked blue, and if there was a red one and a blue one, she took the blue and I took the red. But if there was a yellow and an orchid, why . . ." if you'll take that one and give me this one, then I'll do something for you," . . . that type of thing, but mama got the four-yard piece no matter. Then we looked at the pic-

> tures in the catalog. We didn't have any patte1rns, of course not, back then.[24]

Dressmaking leftovers were used in quiltmaking as were occasional store samples.

All the quiltmakers we interviewed had used good parts of old clothes for quilts. Most often the material was from pants—often denim which made fine sturdy quilts sometimes called "sugguns."[25] These heavy, sturdy cousins of the "house" quilt were most often described as the male's work quilt. Yvonne Didde remembered her grandmother, Bucinto Lucero, calling them the "farm" quilts which were those to play on, to take down to the river, or lie on for picnics. She recalled:

> We used [them] more in the carriage and for cover seats or for on the cover of wagons, and things like that. . . . She had quilts that were just patches—squares on square type of things—and you found them on the seat of the wagon for hauling water, or timber from the mountains for firewood, or often would find it on the seat of the truck or on the seat of the plow. . . . They had a lot of wool filling. They were often out of wool fabric or denim fabrics, things that would take harder wear. . . . If you were going to take a game and play outside or something like that, you used the denim quilts . . .but you wouldn't particularly bring that quilt back into the house. She had a place to store them in the cellar or on the day porch. You didn't bring them back in the house and put them on the bed at all.[26]

Others mentioned having men request a heavy comfort even today, for their personal use in their trucks or for camping. Moving flour sacks, making a frame, and sometimes tying a comfort—this seems to have been the extent of male involvement. Loyce Sage mentioned her youngest boy as being raised under a quilt:

> If he sees a thimble [now] he blinks his eyes and shakes his head because he used to go under the quilt—and when you hang them from the ceiling they shake worse than they do on legs—and he would get down playing with a little car or something and forget and raise up. When he came out from under the quilt, I went thump, thump, thump on his head with the thimble. And to this day (and he is forty-three years old) if he sees a thimble he just automatically dodges because he was raised up under a quilt. They played tents under there. That was a teepee; that was a cave.[27]

Making the Bed

All the women talked of multiple layers of bedding—of both light and heavy quilts. "When it was so severely cold, maybe six or seven quilts to the bed to stay warm. The homes were not nearly as good as we enjoy today," recalled Jessie Halsell of Hatch:

> They were cold, and those cold, bitter, rainy nights when you just couldn't stay warm, it took quite a lot of cover to keep you warm. Fortunately we were always able to have enough quilts. Some families we knew didn't have, but my mama always saw that we had quilts to cover with and stay warm. She was always very, very careful of the care she gave the quilts, too. She didn't allow us children to abuse them. She did not allow us to play in the beds, and break the threads in those quilts. When they needed washing, they got a good washing but they didn't need it that often. She always protected her quilts. She would, on the edge of the quilt, up at the top, she would hand stitch a binding

Figure 3. Wyona Mackey Simmons of Carlsbad with her *Prickly Pear Cactus in Full Bloom*. The quilt is now in the collection of the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe.

> across the top to protect that. That you'd bring up around your shoulders.[28]

In areas where sheep were raised, wool was used, as a substitute for the straw or feathers in mattresses or for the quilts' batting. Yvonne Didde lived for long periods of time with her mother's parents in the mountains four miles from Dulce in northern New Mexico and she remembers:

> The mattress was either down-filled or there were several wool-filled mattresses. There was usually a wool blanket or a very heavy cotton blanket before you put the sheet on—not necessarily to keep the soil from the mattress as to give you extra warmth from underneath. . . . and then you were just covered with comforts and quilts. Depending on the season they could be four or five deep. In each of the larger bedrooms of my grandmother's [Bucinto Lucero] house was a fireplace (not having central heating). I can remember being with my middle sister. If we waited in bed long enough, somebody would come to our fireplace before we got out of bed in the morning. One of the things I always thought was so much fun was that this puffy bed had springs and not a very rigid mattress on it [so] that you laid in this valley and it was quite an effort to get out of bed. Getting in was a lot of fun. You just kind of smushed right in. But, getting out, especially when it was really cold and you had a lot of blanket, was really an effort—to crawl out because it was uphill all the way. If my sister was ornery enough to get the bed bouncing real hard, it was really hard to get out. We had a lot of fun times there [in the bed].[29]

None of the women I talked with used a quilt as the topmost bed covering until very recently. Instead they used what they all called a "bedspread" of some sort—either commercial or homemade. Vera Medling remarked:

> We had feather beds. We took everything off; stirred the feather bed up everyday and put it back. It had to be made so-so. . . . We had straw mattresses and then the feather bed. Then we put flannel sheets and then we had a top blanket and then the quilts. . . . Sometimes we had bedspreads. Bedspreads were very popular when I was young. In the winter time there was about three heavy quilts besides the flannel sheets or double blankets. Flannel—you know, the fuzzy kind. On each bed.[30]

Addie Jouett remarked, "A lot of people used homemade bedspreads or embroidered sheets. We always had embroidered sheets."[31] Mildred McDonnell remembered using a sheet as a bedspread, one that had been "ironed 'til you could see yourself in it!"[32] Loyce also remembered them:

> A lot of people embroidered sheets and used that for a bedspread. I can remember a lot of them, seeing them on people's beds—a huge peacock—things like that were embroidered on a sheet and they covered the bed with the sheet in the daytime.[33]

The major reason given for not having a quilt as the topmost covering was wear. If a quilt had been covering all the other bedding it needed to be washed more frequently. Quilts were washed infrequently. "Now sometimes somebody would have a fancy quilt they used as a bedspread," Loyce remarked:

> But [you] see, the washing was so hard and the cotton packed, just made lumps, and it was so hard to wash. You didn't put them on [the top of the bed] so they'd have to be washed real often. You were careful with your quilts. Nearly everyone took a flour sack or something about ten inches wide and put it across the end of it [the quilt] and basted it in the part that might come up against your face where you'd get the skin oil on it. Then you could take that off and wash it. Because you had to be careful. They were so hard to wash back then. . . . You had to wait 'til summer to wash them, and, of course, we washed on a rub board with a tub and we soaked the quilt. We wet the quilt and took bar soap. And I remember distinctly the first granulated soap we ever saw. We called it washing powder. . . . After we wet it, we rubbed the bar soap on the dirty spots . . .then we put it in the tub and squashed it down into the water . . .put a rock or something in on top of that to hold it down in there because if we didn't it had brown circles on it come morning, after we soaked it overnight. . . . Then we squeezed what water we could out of it and rinsed it over and over in tubs. It took two people to lift it and get it to the clothesline and then we spread it out across as many clotheslines as we had and let it hang down and drip. Everybody would run and shake the quilt to keep it from bunching up and to keep the brown circles off. Nobody ever wanted to wash a quilt.[34]

The informants also mentioned removing wool batting from the inside of some of the heavier quilts, called "comforts." They washed

the wool separately, dried it and then spread it over the lining before securing the top, batting, and lining again with knots.

As my co-worker, Nora Pickens concluded, "It is noteworthy that, according to most of the women we interviewed, quilts were not used as decor in the days of their youth. To them a bed with a quilt showing on it would have looked like an unmade bed, just would have not looked proper. A visitor walking through the house, even through the bedrooms, would not have seen any quilts."[35]

Appearance of Quilts

All my previous fieldwork among traditional rural Pennsylvania farm families prepared me only partially for the New Mexican project. No matter how frugal or conservative my neighbors were, they were affluent by comparison to these counterparts two thousand miles away. Consequently, the Southwestern quilts of the period 1910-1985 have a different look from what I was accustomed to seeing.

Until very recently, Southwestern quiltmakers made quilts from necessity and in great numbers, but they did so with very little means. What they made and how they went about it resulted directly from their commonly shared circumstances and demands. Twentieth-century scrap or salvage quilts are, perhaps, best understood in places like New Mexico and with informants and quiltmakers such as these.

Most of these quiltmakers quilted their tops in fans or shells as a pattern over the quilt's entire surface. These quilting patterns were rarely used in Pennsylvania but they are the dominant ones used in the Southwest—especially on the pieced quilts. Back home quilters did different quilting patterns in each of the areas of a pieced quilt: the border(s), the sashing, the fill-in blocks, the main pieced blocks, as well as those half blocks that led one's eye into the center of the quilt. This was the norm on our light quilts, where the quilting patterns were immediately obvious, as well as on our dark quilts on which quilting was harder to see and appreciate. This approach to quilting is absent in the Southwestern quilts I observed.

The quilts I saw in New Mexico were pieced or appliqued blocks usually with strong horizontal/vertical row orientation which again

Figure 4. Molly Hamilton Simer of Artesia with her *Mystery Block* top.

is in contrast to the Pennsylvania norm where as many are organized with blocks on point. The Southwestern applique designs are primarily those introduced in the 1920s and 1930s. The patterns most often chosen were Sunbonnet Sue, Colonial Dame, and Butterflies, as well as birds or flowers, patterns that utilized scraps and which are often outlined, with a buttonhole stitch in black thread. The appliqued or pieced patterns promoted by twentieth-century quilt designers such as Anne Orr and Ruby McKim were less evident. The major source of published designs was not magazines but the Kansas City newspapers.[37] The dominant pieced patterns we saw were Trip Around the World and strip variations, such as in cotton crazies or stars. Hearts and Gizzards, a pattern done in two contrasting store-bought cottons back home, was transformed by the use of scraps exemplified in a quilt saved by Reva Douglas and made by her mother in Oklahoma in the 1930s.

When speaking of a "friendship quilt" (which was defined as a quilt made by a group and given to a mutual friend or a preacher), a pattern that was often shown was a pieced ship with four small sails along with the women's names outline-embroidered at the base

of each ship. This was a pattern I had not seen in Pennsylvania let alone one used in this manner. Occasionally a friendship quilt was pieced of Album or Chimney Swift blocks—as back home.

Borders, when they were used, were narrow, as was the stripping or sash work. Often there was a small block of contrasting color at the intersections of the horizontal and vertical sashes. The older quilts were relatively small in size. Only recently made quilts were large.

Many of the New Mexican quiltmakers' work evidenced an appreciation for something "bright" to contrast with the "rough edge" of their existence. As Loyce Wood Sage observed:

> Ours were [bright]. That's why I say you can always tell an extrovert from an introvert. . . . Lots of times we would laugh and say, "Ooh, look at this block. This looks like so and so. Nowadays they say it's an art form. I never considered myself an artist. But it is to some extent—it is part of me. It expresses my personality. Even the same pattern. If I did and she did and you did—the choice of color, the choice of set, the choice of quilting—they'd all three be different.[37]

Very few of the quilts were done with a large expanse of white or solid-colored fabric but there was a willingness by the quiltmakers to use a variety of fabric types: double knits, tricot, denim as well as the sacks and bought cottons. Apron gingham and outing flannel, which were fabrics often used as the backing in Pennsylvania, were absent here. Two fabrics were used repeatedly in New Mexico: denim was used in part or solely for many of their comforts, sometimes called "britches" quilts, while tricot was used for whole-cloth as well as pieced examples.[38] As related by Margrette Foutz Baumgardner the latter was considered an above average quilt: "Oh, [my mother] loved beautiful things and she liked to do fancy quilts. In later years the tricot came out. Before that, the satin. Before that they did white on white [called counterpanes]. They did just the pattern and quilted it on the quilt. My mother would do the satin quilts like we do the tricot now. Later she did several tricots before she died. Some of the younger children got tricot quilts as wedding presents."[39]

In Conclusion

Nora Pickens and I purchased nineteen quilts, seven quilt tops, and three quilted blocks by seventeen quiltmakers for the Museum of International Folk Art during the summer of 1985. The quilts were exhibited for the first time at the museum in January and February 1986 as "New Mexico Patchwork Quilts."

Signed "Friend Ships," dyed tobacco sack "Brick" quilts, denim "britches" quilts, and tricot examples illustrate different aspects of Southwestern quilts. When examined in their physical context, juxtaposed alongside the quiltmakers' stories, each provides context for the other and establishes resonances, sought out but not always available, on community, place, and purpose.

The collective voice of these women speaks of resourcefulness in the face of scarcity, of the need to make many bed coverings but conceived of with color and personal preference in mind, and of continued attachment to and meaning in their past.

Notes and References

1. Patricia Cooper and Norma Bradley Buferd, *The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art.*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1977), 15.
2. As Laurel Horton notes in, "A Folklorist's Perspective," *The Quilt Journal* l, no. 1 (1990): 10, "Folklorists are at their best when they examine living traditions and relate them to a well-documented historical record." The author would add that folklorists are in more problematic and sometimes treacherous territory when using information provided by contemporary informants to explain historical objects and attitudes of a different era. For instance, Fawn Valentine, a quilt researcher from West Virginia, suggested to the author that one could not assume that frontier conditions in the Southwest produced a related scrap or salvage quilt in Pennsylvania's early decades or frontier period. Indeed, quilts of that era in Pennsylvania would often have been of whole cloth.
3. Jonathan Holstein's *Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition* (Louisville, KY: Kentucky Quilt Project, 1991) expands upon the original Whitney catalog, 1971 and his book, *The Pieced Quilt: An American Design Tradition* (New York: Galahad Books, 1973).
4. Other published work on quilts from this region which use oral sources to

varying degrees include Suzanne Yabsley, *Texas Quilts, Texas Women* (College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 1984); Karoline Patterson Bresenhan and Nancy O'Bryant Puentes, *Lone Stars/A Legacy of Texas Quilters, 1836–1936* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986); *Stitches in Time/A Legacy of Ozark Quilts* (Rogers, OK: Rogers Historical Museum, 1986). Also relevant are "Textile Diaries: Kansas Quilt Memories" in *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains*, 13, no. 1. (Spring 1990); and *Patterns: A Celebration of Georgia's Quilting Traditions* (Madison, GA: Madison-Morgan Cultural Center, 1990).

5. Only one informant was in both the 1973/1974 and the 1985 projects: Olive Quirl Thompson Havenhill of Clovis, NM.
6. In November 1973, the Oral Traditions Project began as part of the Union County Bicentennial Commission. See "The Oral Traditions Project," in *Folklife* 29 (Fall 1991) for an overview of its work.
7. See Nora Pickens, "Scrap Quilts of New Mexico" *Uncoverings 1986*, ed. Sally Garoutte (Mill Valley, CA: American Quilt Study Group, 1987), 39–46.
8. Mable Otis Head, interview with author, Farmington NM, June 29,1985. Interviews were recorded in the informants' homes unless otherwise indicated.
9. Vera Marida Reynolds Medling, interview with author, Chama NM, July 2, 1985.
10. Loyce Wood Sage, interview with author in the local fabric shop, Gallup NM, June 28, 1985. She has lived in Gallup since 1973.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. A section was 320 acre —what a homesteader could then claim. As noted in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1969 ed., s.v. "Homestead and Exemption Laws," later [homestead] acts were less beneficial to settlers than was the original act of 1862. In the west only the arid and semi-arid lands were left for disposal by 1900. [This includes the type settled by the families we interviewed.] The Kincaid act of 1904, applying only to western Nebraska, allowed 640-ac. tracts, which were enough for meager subsistence at dry farming. But the Mondell act of 1909 gave only 320 ac. in the rest of the west. This was just enough to lure farmers to their doom, unless they acted as agents for land monopolists. The same was true of the Stock-Raising Homestead act of 1916, which granted 640 ac. in a region where one cow needed from 50–100 ac. of pasture.
14. Sears, Roebuck and Company actually held their national quilt contest at Chicago's Century of Progress Exposition in 1933. For more informa-

tion about the contest see Barbara Brackman and Merikay Waldvogel, *Patchwork Souvenirs of the 1933 Chicago World's Fair*, (Knoxville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1993).

15. Sage interview.
16. Ibid.
17. Medling interview.
18. Ibid.
19. Addie Stevens Jouett, interview with author, Clovis NM, July 6, 1985.
20. Margrette Foutz Baumgardner, interview in the local fabric store with author, Gallup NM, June 27, 1985.
21. Yvonne Bunnell Didde, interview with author, Kirtland NM, June 29, 1985. She was born in 1951 in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She is a very active quiltmaker who is involved with the local quilt guild in Farmington but whose recollections are of another era—as a young girl she was very close to her mother's mother from whom she learned quiltmaking and the role that quilts played in people's lives. Her grandmother, Bucinto Lucero was ninety years old and still an active quilter in Albuquerque at the time of Yvonne's interview.
22. Sage interview; see Yabsley's *Texas Quilts, Texas Women*, 76, for a good example of a tobacco sack quilt.
23. Didde interview.
24. Sage interview.
25. See Yabsley, *Texas Quilts/Texas Women*, 23, 32, 85.
26. Didde interview.
27. Sage interview.
28 Jessie Darnell Halsell, interview with author, Hatch NM, July 9, 1985. This protective edging is sometimes called a "beard guard" in Pennsylvania.
29. Didde interview.
30. Ibid.
31. Jouett interview.
32. Pickens, "Scrap Quilts," 41.
33. Sage interview.
34. Ibid.
35. Pickens, "Scrap Quilts," 40.
36. See Louise O. Townsend, "Kansas City Star Quilt Patterns 1928–1949," *Uncoverings 1984* , ed. Sally Garoutte (Mill Valley, CA: American Quilt Study Group,1985), 115–30.
37. Sage interview.
38. According to Andrea Graham of Virginia City, Nevada, Mormons favor

making quilts from tricot, correspondence with author, June 1993. Nora Pickens and I purchased a pieced tricot quilt for the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe. It was atypical however in that it was pieced of a variety of pastel tricots in the fan pattern. It was quilted by the senior citizens quilting group in Hobbs, New Mexico.

39. Baumgardner interview.