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Women and Their Quilts As Portrayed by Some American Authors

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American authors have not always written about American subjects. As a matter of fact, early American writers usually imitated the English and other Europeans in style as well as subject, and rehashed old-world themes. It was not until Ralph Waldo Emerson and other American critics began asking their fellow Americans to write honestly and originally about the subjects they knew best that writers began to look at the daily lives of the ordinary Americans around them. In "The American Scholar" (1837) Emerson observed that activities occurring on the farms and in the villages should be the writers' first objects of study. At this time the Revolutionary ideal that all men were created equal was taken quite literally. Everyone worked and took his or her work as a matter of course. Work was the basis of family life and family life was the basis of the community. From work came the benefits that made the home enjoyable and meaningful. For women this included preparing the meals, creating the clothes, making all the household articles including the quilts; for the community, husking, apple-paring, wood cutting, and other bees, especially quilting. It was only natural, therefore, that when American authors began taking Emerson's advice, quilting bees would be among the subjects written about. And, although the focus changed as social conditions changed, American authors writing drama, fiction and poetry, have continued to include quilts in their writing to the present day.

Since quilting bees (also known as quilting parties and quiltings) were such an important part of the social life of rural communities, these bees were the subjects of the early writings. Men writers concentrated on the evening's activities, while women wrote about the happenings around the quilting frames as well. This is not to say that some men were not knowledgeable about quilts, as will be seen in the case of George Washington Harris (below). It was just that men wrote most about the events they knew the most about. Rowland E.

Robinson wrote seven books about life in a mythical New England village, Danvis, Vermont. These books were not novels but rather sketchbooks painstakingly depicting the life—particularly the life of men and boys—as it was lived in the New England hills before the coming of the railroad. He minutely describes husking, logging, raising, drawing, harvesting and paring bees, but not quilting bees. In UNCLE LISHA'S SHOP Robinson says that quiltings were more the affairs of women and girls, but that the men were in demand when the quilt was shaken and dancing was to be done.[1] Both Robinson and George Washington Harris knew the correct name of quilt patterns and used them in their stories.

The earliest fictionalized writing that I have found whose subject is a quilting bee is "The Quilting Party" by T. S. Arthur, which appeared in GODEY'S LADY'S BOOK in September, 1849. It relates a disappointing "affair of the heart" that took place at a quilting party more than twenty years before. Only the first paragraph is within the scope of this paper.

> Our young ladies of the present generation know little of the mysteries of "Irish chain," "rising star," "block work," or "Job's trouble," and would be as likely to mistake a set of quilting frames for clothes poles as for anything else. It was different in our younger days. Half a dozen handsome patchwork quilts were indispensable then as a marriage portion; quite as much so as a piano or guitar is at present. And the quilting party was equally indicative of the coming-out and being "in the market," as the fashionable gatherings together of our times that be.[2]

Perhaps Mr. Arthur had moved to the city in the intervening twenty years. At any rate, his view of the state of this social event was not shared by other authors, who continued to write about quilting parties for another fifty years at least.

A contemporary of T. S. Arthur, Harriett Beecher Stowe, includes in her book THE MINISTER'S WOOING the circumstances surrounding a quilting that had happened at some time in the past, or as she states it, "in those days."[3]

> The good wives of New England, impressed with that thrifty orthodoxy of economy which forbids to waste the merest trifle, had a habit of saving every scrap clipped out in the fashioning of household garments, and these they cut into fanciful patterns and constructed of them rainbow shapes and quaint traceries, the arrangement of which became one of

> their few fine arts. . . .
>
> When a wedding was forthcoming, there was a solemn review of the stores of beauty and utility thus provided, and the patchwork spread best worthy of such distinction was chosen for the quilting. Thereto, duly summoned, trooped all intimate female friends of the bride, old and young; and the quilt being spread on a frame, and wadded with cotton, each vied with the others in the delicacy of the quilting she could put upon it. For the quilting was also a fine art, and had its delicacies and nice points, — which grave elderly matrons discussed with judicious care. The quilting generally began at an early hour in the afternoon and ended at dark with a great supper and general jubilee, at which that ignorant and incapable sex which could not quilt was allowed to appear and put in claims for consideration of another nature. . . .
>
> The quilt pattern was gloriously drawn in oak-leaves, done in indigo; and soon all the company, young and old, were passing busy fingers over it; and conversation went on briskly.

One of "that ignorant and incapable sex that could not quilt," George Washington Harris, wrote a totally irreverent but uproariously funny yarn about those "considerations of another nature" that Harriett Beecher Stowe alludes to. The setting for "Mrs. Yardley's Quilting" is the Tennessee hill country during the 1850s when Harris wrote the story. Although written in the East Tennessee dialect of that time, this story is well worth the effort it takes to read. Sut Lovingood, the uncouth, illiterate, but perceptive character who is the *persona* of this and other stories by Harris, has uncomplimentary opinions about women and quilts, although he greatly admires quiltings. He introduces "Missis" Yardley as "the old quilt-mercheen" and claims that her heart stopped beating because of the loss of a nine diamond quilt.

> . . . Yu see quilts wer wun ove her speshul gifts; she run strong on the bed-kiver question. Irish chain, star ove'Texas, sunflower, nine dimunt, saw teeth, checker board, an' shell quilts; blue, an' white, an' yaller an' black coverlids, an' callicker-cumfurts reigned triumphan' 'bout her hous'. They wer packed in drawers, layin in shelfs full, wer hung four dubbil on lines in the lof, packed in chists, piled on cheers, an' wer everywhar, even ontu the beds, and wer changed every bed-makin. She told everybody she cud git tu listen to hit that

> she ment tu give every durn'd one ove them tu Sal when she got married. Oh, Lordy! what es fat a gal es Sal Yardley cud ever du wif half ove em, an' sleepin wif a husbun at that, is more nor I ever cud see through. Jus' think ove her onder twenty layer ove quilts in July, an' yu in thar too.[4]

Mrs. Yardley "hed narrated hit thru the neighborhood that next Saterday she'd gin a quiltin—three quilts an' one cumfurt tu tie. 'Goblers, fiddils, gals, an' whisky,' wer the words she sent tu the menfolk, an' more tetchin ur wakenin words never drap't ofen an 'oman's tongue." The entire community attended. "Everybody, he an' she what wer baptized b'levers in the righteousness ove quilting wer thar, an' hit jus' so happen'd that everybody in them parts, from fifteen summers tu fifty winters, were unannamus b'levers."

At this point Sut gives his stamp of approval to all quiltings. "Es I swung my eye over the crowd, George, I thought quiltins, managed in a morril an' sensibil way, truly am good things—good fur free drinkin, good fur free eatin, good fur free huggin, good fur free dancin, good fur free fitin, an' goodest ove all fur poperlatin a country fas'." Sut then describes the scene on the day of the quilting.

> All the plow-lines an' clothes-lines wer straiched tu every post an' tree. Quilts purvailed. Durn my gizzard ef two acres roun that ar house warn't jis' one solid quilt, all out a-sunnin, an' tu be seed. They dazzled the eyes, skeered the hosses, gin wimen the heart-burn an' perdominated.
>
> To'ards sundown the he's begun tu drap in. Yearnis' needil-drivin commenced tu lose groun; threads broke ofen, thimbils got los', an' quilts needed anuther roll. Gigglin, winkin, whisperin, smoofin ove har, an' gals a-ticklin one anuther, wer a-gainin every inch ove groun what the needils los'.

Mrs. Yardley becomes the victim of a practical joke Sut ostensibly plays on a town dude he calls the "dominecker feller." Sut ties the end of a clothes line, filled with Mrs. Yardley's prize quilts, to the stirrups of the dominecker feller's horse and then scares the horse so that he runs away. The horse runs over Mrs. Yardley, his hind leg going through a quilt that she and another woman are "apraisin hits perfeckshuns," and the horse drags the quilt along after him as he flees. According to Sut, Mrs. Yardley's dying words are "Oh my preshus nine dimunt quilt."

George Washington Harris accurately perceives, however humorously, the pride many women took in their quiltmaking. He also shows, as did Harriet Beecher Stowe and T. S. Arthur, the importance

of quilts in a bride's dowry. Mrs. Yardley was concerned that her daughter have all the advantages that she as a mother could provide—"twenty layers ove quilts," in Sut's estimation.

Mary Wilkins Freeman's sketch, "A Quilting Bee in Our Village," published in 1898, also indicates a mother's recognition of the importance of the engagement quilt. She has done the unheard-of—purchased new material to use in the patchwork quilt. The reader learns this through the conversation of two of the quilters—gossips—traditionally thought to be an integral part of every quilting bee. This writing begins with the issuing of an invitation.

> One sometimes wonders whether it will ever be possible in our village to attain absolute rest and completion with regard to quilts. One thinks after a week fairly swarming with quilting bees, "now every housewife in the place must be well supplied; there will be no need to make more quilts for six months at least." Then, the next morning a nice little becurled girl in a clean pinafore knocks at the door and repeats demurely her well-conned lesson: "Mother sends her compliments, and would be happy to have you come to her quilting bee this afternoon."[5]

Brama Lincoln White's mother was giving the bee to announce the engagement of her daughter.

> She ushered her guests into the parlor, where the great quilting-frame was stretched. It occupied nearly the entire room. There was just enough space for the quilters to file around and seat themselves four to a side. The sheet of patchwork was tied firmly to the pegs on the quilting-frame. The pattern was intricate, representing the rising sun, the number of pieces almost beyond belief; the calicoes comprising it were of the finest and brightest.
>
> "Most all the pieces are new, an' I don't believe but what Mis' White cut them right off goods in the store," Lurinda Snell whispered to Mrs. Wheelock when the hostess had withdrawn and they had begun their labors.
>
> They further agreed among themselves that Mrs. White and Brama must have secretly prepared the patchwork in view of some sudden and wholly uncertain matrimonial contingency.
>
> "I don't believe but what this quilt has been pieced ever since Brama Lincoln was sixteen years old," whispered Lurinda Snell, so loud that all the women could hear her. Then suddenly she pounced forward and pointed with her

> sharp forefinger at a piece of green and white calico in the middle of the quilt. "There, I knew it," said she. "I remember that piece of calico in a square I saw Brama Lincoln piecing over at our house before Francis was married." Lurinda Snell has a wonderful memory.
>
> "That's a good many years ago," said Lottie Green.
>
> "Yes," whispered Lurinda Snell. When she whispers her s's always hiss so that they make one's ears ache, and she is very apt to whisper... Then she thought she heard Mrs. White coming, and said, keeping up very low, in such a pleasant voice, "How comfortable it is in this room for all it is such a hot afternoon." But her cunning was quite needless, for Mrs. White was not coming.

After an informative description of the actual quilting, Freeman concludes the piece with a rather complete recounting of the evening's social activities.

In 1896 a small volume of poems written by John Langdon Heaton was published. Called THE QUILTING BEE AND OTHER RHYMES, the dedicatory sonnet read:

To My Wife:
These Lines Entitled:
The Quilting Bee:

As when the farmers' wives at quilting time
Grouped 'round the frames that bear the work they ply,
Cover a little space with scroll and line
Of pattern slowly wrought and patiently,
Then turn the edges inward, till at last
Warm hand meets hand along the middle roll,
And daylight, fading, finds the labor past,
The stitches ended at a common goal—
So may the fabric of commingling fates
Draw us still closer as our lives flow on
Till, hand in hand, at sunset's golden gates
We face the dark beyond in unison,
The work we wrought upon life's narrowing roll
Forming the pattern of one perfect whole.[6]

This poem, written almost exactly fifty years after the GODEY'S LADY'S BOOK sketch, seems to me a fitting conclusion to a discussion of the era when authors were chiefly concerned with the activities of the quilting bee.

As the United States became more urbanized and the social impor-

tance of the quilting bee decreased, authors turned their attentions to the individual quiltmaker. What is considered one of the best of Mary Wilkins Freeman's short stories, "An Honest Soul," was one of the first to do so. Although by the end of the Civil War old-time Calvinism was a thing of the past in New England, the scars left by its influence were still present when Freeman was writing at the close of the nineteenth century. Stowe's "thrifty orthodoxy of economy" was a part of that heritage. Mary Wilkins Freeman believed that the New England mind was complex in its combination of morbidly sensitive conscience and overdeveloped will.[7] Martha Patch, the main character in "An Honest Soul," certainly had an overrefined conscience. Martha, one of the many lonely, impoverished seamstresses who people Freeman's stories, one day receives orders for two patchwork quilts. For each completed one she will be paid one dollar. Each customer leaves a bundle of scraps for her to use. When she had completed the two quilts, she discovers that in one of them she has inadvertently used a pink-rose calico that she believes belongs to the other customer. She rips both apart and resews them, only to find the calico belonged in the quilt where she had first used it. Martha completes both quilts again, but by this time, having earned no money, she had not eaten for several days. When she finally is able to deliver the quilts, she faints and lies unconscious until a neighbor rescues her.

Martha obviously derives no pleasure from quilt making. The only pleasant emotion she feels is her admiration for the "handsome" pieces of French calico in one scrap bag. "That jest takes my eye; them little pink roses is pretty . . . They'll make a good lookin' quilt."[8] And her enjoyment of the calico is what causes her difficulty. She cannot remember from which bag those pieces came. Martha is punished for her enjoyment of French calico.

Mrs. Freeman's preoccupation with the punishment of sins is also revealed in two of her numerous stories for children. "The Patchwork School" describes the activities of a school "for the improvement of children who tried their parents and all their friends with ill behavior."[9] They were set to sewing patchwork until their behavior improved.

"Ann Lizy's Patchwork" relates the difficulties encountered by Ann Lizy, an eight-year-old girl, who intentionally loses the four squares of patchwork that her grandmother insists she take with her to her friends's house.

> ". . . you must sew 'em all, over and over before you play any. Sew 'em real fine and even, or you'll have to pick the stitches out when you get home."[10]

Ann Lizy had already pieced one quilt and the second one looked to her like "a checked and besprigged calico mountain." She confesses to her grandmother that she lost the patchwork on purpose and her grandmother says: "Ownin'-up takes away *some* of the sin but not *all*." But her grandmother secretly believes that Ann Lizy has learned her lesson. Making quilts was not looked upon by Mrs. Freeman as in any way a pleasurable activity.

Aunt Mehetabel, the main character of Dorothy Canfield Fisher's short story "The Bedquilt" might have been another Martha Patch.

> Of all the Elwell family Aunt Mehetabel was certainly the most unimportant member. It was in the old-time New England days, when an unmarried woman was an old maid at twenty, at forty was everyone's servant, and at sixty had gone through so much discipline that she could need no more in the next world. Aunt Mehetabel was sixty-eight.[11]

She could also make patchwork quilts well. However, the resemblance between her and Martha Patch is superficial because Aunt Mehetabel produced a quilt "good enough for the angels to quilt." It took five years to complete and in that time she became "a part of the world," so much so that when it was completed, her brother, with whose family she lived, declared, "By ginger! That's goin' to the County Fair." Mehetabel, who has never been more than six miles from home, was urged by her family to attend the fair when a neighbor reported that her quilt was in a glass case in "Agricultural Hall." As she got ready to go, each member of the family suggested a different part of the fair she must see. On her return, Mehetabel's first words were:

> "It was just perfect!" she said. "Finer even than I thought. They've got it hanging up in the very middle of a sort o' closet made of glass, and one of the lower corners is ripped and turned back so's to show the seams on the wrong side."

Mehetabel said she had seen the "head of the hull concurn" pin a big bow of blue ribbon with a label on it, "First Prize." "Didn't you go see anything else?"... "Why no," said Mehetabel... "Only the quilt. Why should I?"

And the story ends with these words:

> Vague recollections of hymnbook phrases came into her mind. They were the only kind of poetic expression she knew. But they were dismissed as being sacrilegious to use for something in real life. Also as not being nearly striking enough.
>
> Finally, "I tell you it looked real *good,*" she assured them

> and sat staring into the fire, on her tired old face the supreme content of an artist who has realized his ideal.

The pride Aunt Mehetabel displays when she thinks about her masterpiece matches Sut Lovingood's assessment of Mrs. Yardley's dying devotion to her quilts. But Aunt Mehetabel's family were more overwhelmed by her unsuspected talent than proud of her accomplishment. The family of Mrs. Widow Jones in the short story "The Comforter Returneth" by MacKinley Kantor were unashamedly proud of their mother's quilts. When the sons displayed the quilts for the Judge, a character in the story:

> . . . the boys unfolded one after another, and their brown faces were excited; they acted as a bunch of young girls might have acted, over an equal treasure.
>
> The Judge blinked. This was a race of hunters and woodsmen. These boys, he knew, spent their winters in trapping and wading the cold snows, and their ancestors had before them. But they took a fervent pride in the soft and delicate stitchings of the calico folds.
>
> "It was my grandmother started me," said Mrs. Jones in her mild and humble voice. "She was a great one for seaming and quilting, and even when her eyes went back on her she could still do it, because of the sense that lay in her fingers. I used to sit by her when I was very small, and thread the needles that her old eyes couldn't see to thread. That Fish-Tail there—it's the one John's holding up—that brown and white Fish-Tail was the first I ever pieced . . We've got everyday ones—crazy quilts—that we use on our beds now. But the boys won't let me use these except for special occasions; and their father never would before them.[12]

When Judge Sheffield asks Mrs. Jones if she did all these herself, she replies that she had to have something to do with her hands in the evenings.

> She picked up a quilt in her awkward, calloused hands, touching it as lightly as one might caress the petals of a flower. "Kerosene lamps and candlelight too," she said, and she seemed to be speaking to herself then. "But my eyes are good; they always were. I can sew easy enough . . . Sometimes when conditions were hard . . . when hard times have come upon us, I have been tempted to sell my quilts." . . .
>
> The widow arose suddenly; her face still shining. "Come, boys, put those back in the trunks now." Judge Sheffield

> thought that she had indulged her pride beyond its common limits and dared do so no longer.

The plot of the story involves the oldest son's preventing the sale of the cherished quilts and the eventual gift of "the best and brightest quilt, "the Blazing Star'" to the Judge for his help in the episode.

MacKinley Kantor states in an afterword in this story that it is fictitious except for the country woman and her quilts. He tells that her name was Mrs. B. N. Jones and that she did indeed have trunks full of quilts. He hunted and fished with her sons and Kantor remembers returning to their home on cold winter nights and snuggling down under Blazing Stars, Blue Birds and Morning Glories. Kantor was indeed impressed by the Blazing Star. His description of it in "The Comforter Returneth" is the most accurate and beautiful description of a quilt I have read:

> It started with flame and pink in the center of every huge exploding pattern. The little diamond-shaped pieces turned on through orange into yellow and then green and lilac, and finally they blazed again all around the edges. And the lines of quilting themselves, the painstaking stitches, the millions and millions of little thread-dots in the whole rainbow expanse—they were a miracle to see.

Two other works deserve brief mention at this point. One of the most popular American one-act plays is TRIFLES by Susan Glaspell.[13] Glaspell rewrote her earlier short story "A Jury of Her Peers" as this play in 1926. In the play a woman has been accused of murdering her husband, and three men come to her from home to find clues to the motive. Two of their wives who have accompanied them not only discover the motive but also decide not to reveal it to the men. Their discoveries would be considered "trifles" by the men. One "trifle" is the log cabin quilt the woman had been piecing. Mrs. Hale tells Mrs. Peters that the block Mrs. Wright was working on was poorly sewn while the rest was nice and even. It looked as if she didn't know what she was doing. The central conflict is between the masculine attitude of logic and might, and the feminine emphasis on love and forgiveness, but the importance to the present paper is Susan Glaspell's recognition that a woman's state of mind could be deduced in her stitches.

"Dove in the Window" is set in my native state, Oklahoma, one of the last American frontiers. Its main character is a grandmother who had homesteaded first in West Texas and then in Oklahoma. In this story the reader senses how pioneer women clung to anything that reminded them of "back home." She had pieced a Dove in the

Window for each of her grandchildren, and this is why:

> When you're a stranger in a big country, little things like quilts mean a lot to you. I'd grown up in Tennessee, and Texas seemed mighty lonesome to me—there was so much sky. The prettiest quilt I ever had was one I made when I was in West Texas. It was a Saw Tooth pieced out of your gran'pa's old blue jeans, Vinnie, and unbleached domestic. It was put together, stake and rider, with the tails of my old red dresses. It made me homesick, someway, but it comforted me, too, because it reminded me of the fence rows of home—there was nothing but barbed wire in Texas.
>
> I missed the birds so much—the only ones you'd see, besides chaparral and buzzards, were the wild doves, and they were the only things I found in Texas the same as in Tennessee.[14]

Most authors who have written fiction or poetry about quilts during the last fifty years have used the quilts as objects from which to derive a theme. They have ignored the quiltmakers. For example, several use quilts as memory albums much the way Eliza Hall did in AUNT JANE OF KENTUCKY,[15] although "Aunt Jane's Album" looks past the quilt at the maker. In a three-act play written in 1936, an author uses a quilt as the instrument for a man's recovery from amnesia.[16] In another short story, a pieced quilt helps solve the murder of a young man,[17] and still another one is the object that triggers a periodic appearance of a ghost.[18]

In contemporary fiction the word "patchwork" is often used as a simile to describe something, or quilts may be referred to as security blankets or comforts. And in fiction a few unmarried aunts still make quilts to send to their nieces or nephews who live in the city. One notable exception to the above is a short story that appeared in REDBOOK magazine in 1974, called "Quilting Lady."[19] The quilting *lady* turns out to be a man. What a long way we have come since Harriet Beecher Stowe's tart remark about that incapable sex that could *not* quilt!

Notes and References:

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2. T.S. Arthur, "The Quilting Party," GODEY'S LADY'S BOOK, Vol. 39, September, 1849, p. 185.
3. Harriett Beecher Stowe, THE MINISTER'S WOOING, Chicago, W.B. Conkey, no date. This and subsequent quotations from THE MINISTER'S WOOING are found on pages 287–97 in this edition.
4. George Washington Harris, "Mrs. Yardley's Quilting," SUT LOVINGOOD. YARNS SPUN BY A "NAT'RAL BORN DURN'D FOOL" WARPED AND WOVE FOR PUBLIC WEAR, pp. 133–49. "Mrs. Yardley's Quilting" is widely anthologized in college American literature textbooks, one of which is Cleanth Brooks, R.W.B. Lewis and Robert Penn Warren AMERICAN LITERATURE: THE MAKER AND THE MAKING Volume 1, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1973.
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6. John Langdon Heaton, THE QUILTING BEE AND OTHER RHYMES, New York, Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1896, p. 5.
7. Percy D. Westbrook, ACRES OF FLINT: NEW ENGLAND 1870–1900, Metuchen, N.J. Scarecrow Press, 1951, p. 98.
8. Mary E. Freeman, "An Honest Soul," A HUMBLE ROMANCE AND OTHER STORIES, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1887, p. 72.
9. Mary E. Freeman, "The Patchwork School," POT OF GOLD AND OTHER STORIES, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1892, pp. 198–218.
10. Mary E. Freeman, "Ann Lizy's Patchwork," YOUNG LUCRETIA AND OTHER STORIES, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1892, pp. 68–81. This and subsequent quotations from "Ann Lizy's Patchwork" comes from this edition.

11. Dorothy Canfield Fisher, "The Bedquilt," A HARVEST OF STORIES, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1947, pp. 52–60. This and subsequent quotations from "The Bedquilt" came from this edition.
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13. Susan Glaspell, TRIFLES AND SIX OTHER SHORT PLAYS, Ernest Benn, Ltd., London, 1926.
14. Elizabeth Alden Settle, "Dove in the Window," part IX "From the Blackjacks," FOLK-SAY: A REGIONAL MISCELLANY, 1931, ed. B.A. Botkin, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma, 1931, p. 260.
15. Eliza Calvert Hall, "Aunt Jane's Album," AUNT JANE OF KENTUCKY, Boston, Little Brown and Company, 1907, pp. 53–82.
16. Arthur Jearue, THE PATCHWORK QUILT, Minneapolis, Northwestern Press, 1935.
17. Dorothy House Guilday, "The Patchwork Quilt," A WISCONSIN HARVEST, ed. August Derleth, Sauk City, Wisconsin, Staunton Lee, 1966, pp. 118–23.
18. August Derleth, "The Patchwork Quilt," DWELLERS IN DARKNESS, Sauk City, Wisconsin, Arklam House, 1976, pp. 75–87.
19. Susan Troth, "Quilting Lady," REDBOOK, Vol. 142, no. 5, March 1974. pp. 62–3.

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