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Hubert Ver Mehren and Home Art Studios

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The name Hope Winslow in the title of a 1933 catalog is probably better known than the little recognized man who produced the book and designed some unique twentieth-century pieced quilt patterns. Hubert Ver Mehren of Des Moines, Iowa, marketed his needlework items through magazines, newspapers, and mail-order catalogs. Examination of a dozen newspapers and periodicals and seven versions of his books revealed the growth of Ver Mehren's work in the 1920s and 1930s. The research provides information about some of the by-lines associated with the patterns and shows how Home Art Studios, the title usually associated with the quilt patterns, functioned in relation to Ver Mehren's primary business, the Iowa Button and Pleating Company. The results credit Hubert Ver Mehren with being an artist, entrepreneur, and marketing expert whose name should be attached henceforth to all his original designs.

Introduction: Who Was Hope Winslow?

Who was Hope Winslow, the young woman pictured on page one of *Hope Winslow's Quilt Book* copyrighted in 1933 by Hubert Ver Mehren? Below the photograph she addressed the "fellow-enthusiast" in a letter which closed, "Yours for more and better quilts, Hope Winslow." Her name recalled the American spirit of optimism and the historic Plymouth Colony to people dealing with the Great Depression. She appealed to a post-World War I public that viewed quilts as symbols of the values of the country's founders as well as coverings for the popular early American style beds.¹ At a time when a multitude of pattern producers competed for the quilter's attention in the print



media, this cordial Hope Winslow personified the astute marketing strategies of versatile and talented Hubert Ver Mehren, a businessman, entrepreneur, and quilt designer in Des Moines, Iowa.²

In the mid-1920s Ver Mehren began stamping embroidery designs on household linens, then turned to producing quilt catalogs, kits, and patterns that built on the quilting tradition and greatly added to it. After trying basic patterns, he soon began to design intricate repeating block layouts and new, unusual, large pieced medallion designs shaded in the popular solid colors of the time. He also created separate complex pieced border patterns that could be added to any of his quilts. His elaborate quilting designs filled and enhanced the open spaces. Quilt authority Cuesta Benberry considers Ver Mehren's pieced medallions "the most ORIGINALLY conceived pieced patterns in the 20th century," equal in originality to Marie Webster's applique designs.³

For years quilt historians and pattern collectors have searched for information about these distinctive and original designs. They found clues in the 1933 copyright date, the H. Ver Mehren name, and the Des Moines, Iowa, location printed in very small type inside the front covers of *Hope Winslow's Quilt Book* and one edition of his *Colonial Quilts* book. They compiled lists of newspapers and filed clippings in numerical order. Some even tracked down Mr. Ver Mehren in the 1960s, purchased patterns he still had in stock, and then circulated the originals to be traced by those who wanted copies. A great deal of credit goes to the small groups of collectors in the "Round Robins" of the 1950s and 1960s who found, preserved, and circulated quilt ephemera. Their efforts succeeded in recognizing Ver Mehren as the producer of the patterns which they labeled under the heading "Home Art Studios."⁴

Who was Hope Winslow—and who were Bettina, Carol Dean, Mary Jacobs, Lucretia King, Nancy Lee, and Gertrude May, all names that have been connected with Ver Mehren's patterns? Some were real people, and some were aliases or completely fictitious. These various names have caused confusion and mistaken assumptions for researchers. This paper presents new information about the origin, development, and operation of the Ver Mehren enterprise based primarily on the examination of printed material: six Des Moines-based



publications, other newspapers and periodicals, eighteen copies of Ver Mehren's books, several original patterns, and some miscellaneous flyers. The research uncovers the roles or identities of the people involved, both real and imaginary. The results show that the Home Art Studios label does not sufficiently recognize the people connected to that name or credit the individual who created and marketed some of the twentieth century's most original quilt designs.

Hubert Ver Mehren: Background

Hubert Ver Mehren was born August 22, 1892, in Arcadia, Iowa, the home town of his mother whose father, a Dutch immigrant, was the local doctor.⁵ The Ver Mehren family actually lived in Omaha, Nebraska, about eighty miles southwest of the tiny rural Iowa town. Hubert's father, Herman Ver Mehren, also of Dutch ancestry, had emigrated from Germany to Nebraska. He married his second wife, Frances, and eventually became president of the Ideal Button & Pleating Company located in Omaha.⁶

After graduating from high school, Hubert Ver Mehren worked for a collection agency before serving as a medic during World War I. He was known as "Van" because of his Dutch heritage, stood six feet tall, and had gray hair by the age of twenty-six. In 1920, he married Mary Ellen Jacobs, his step-mother's younger sister, and moved to Des Moines, Iowa, to manage the *Iowa* Button and Pleating Company (see figure 1).⁷ His father was president of the Iowa company while he served as secretary and treasurer for both corporations.⁸ The City Office of Iowa Button and Pleating (spelled Plaiting on their catalog) was located at 305 7th Street, about two blocks away from the factory at 202 8th Street. Mary, or "Mayme," Ver Mehren worked as the bookkeeper for the business.⁹

Both the Ideal company in Omaha and the Iowa company in Des Moines dealt with customers by mail through catalogs with identical contents inside different covers.¹⁰ The cover of the *Style Book of Iowa Button & Plaiting Co., Inc.* listed among other items: beading, braiding, buttons, buttonholes, embroidering, eyelets, hemstitching, initials, picot edging, pleating, and scalloping. Inside, under the heading "Stamp-



Figure 1. Mary and Hubert Ver Mehren. Photograph courtesy of Dick Ver Mehren.



ing," the catalog stated: "We stamp all kinds of plain or fancy designs, Borders, Letters, Initials, Monograms of the latest types on Table Cloths, Napkins, Towels, Doilies, Lunch Sets, Waists, Chemises, Corset Covers, Underwear, Baby Clothes, etc., or any article where embroidery could be used. . . . We can make and stamp monograms of all kinds to order."¹¹

The Button and Pleating business prospered in the early 1920s. By mid-decade, the Ver Mehrens had built a new house at 531 Waterbury Circle in Des Moines, and Mary had given birth to a daughter. As changes in clothing styles decreased the demand for some of the fashion services, Ver Mehren began to stamp embroidery designs on linens and quilt blocks. His son was born during the 1928 Iowa State Fair while he was selling Iowa Button and Pleating goods at the fairgrounds.¹²

Ver Mehren and *People's Popular Monthly*

Ver Mehren did not have to go far to find a way to distribute these new products to a larger market. Des Moines, the sixth largest publishing center in the country, was home to numerous farm and family magazines, three of which had more than one million subscribers.¹³ One of the three, *People's Popular Monthly*, is virtually unknown now. It played a crucial role, however, in the development of two important pattern providers by giving local talent a chance to reach a national audience. In the early 1920s, Carlie Sexton, the supervisor of the circulation department, had launched her mail-order quilt pattern business and writing career with two signed articles about quilts in the magazine.¹⁴

In 1926, Kathern Ayres, recently graduated from Iowa State College, joined the staff of *People's Popular Monthly* as the editor of the home pages. To give the appearance of having a larger staff in her department, she adopted the name "Lucretia King" as the by-line for the needlework column.¹⁵ Embroidered pillow cases and a comfort protector photographed on a bed at Younker Brothers, a large department store in Des Moines, illustrated a feature in November 1926. Ver Mehren had produced these linens, as well as a dresser scarf, in a Wild



Figure 2. Eight designs of the thirty-two block set later called “Mother’s Old Fashioned Flower Garden” designed by Hubert Ver Mehren. From *People’s Popular Monthly*, May 1931. Collection of the author.

Rose design. He would continue to stamp dresser scarves, pillow cases, and quilt protectors in this and many other designs for years to come.

Kathern Ayres and Hubert Ver Mehren worked together in choosing a variety of needlework items for her column. In 1928 “Lucretia King” began offering stamped quilt blocks along with embroidery floss in a variety of colors.¹⁶ She suggested setting the blocks together in an ordinary, standard layout with white or colored strips for sashing and borders. Neither Ayres or Ver Mehren knew much about making quilts



although Ayres had seen family members quilting in the front parlor when she was growing up.¹⁷

The stamped quilt blocks shown in *People's Popular Monthly* were generally of two types. One category consisted of designs executed in cross-stitch. Some of these patterns were similar or identical to products sold by the Ladies Art Company and the Rainbow Quilt Block Company. The second category featured outline-embroidery of natural-looking floral motifs. Kathern Ayres was responsible for some of the flower designs. She copied pictures of flowers and worked out the patterns at a time when copyright issues were not considered.¹⁸ Ver Mehren had natural artistic ability, a characteristic of members of his family before him, and also drew many embroidery designs.¹⁹ *People's Popular Monthly* showed eight blocks of his "Old Fashioned Flower Garden" in May 1930 (see figure 2). In 1931, the Ideal Button & Pleating Company of Omaha copyrighted the Color Chart for all four of the eight-block sets, indicating that Ver Mehren's products belonged equally to the older Omaha business.²⁰

Kathern Ayres remembers Ver Mehren as hard working and conscientious, with a good sense about what would sell. He was also willing to carry out her ideas. She suggested, for example, that he provide torn strips of fabrics for quilt borders. Kathern's secretary then assembled all the materials for an order, including rolls of border strips, in a large envelope. An advertising circular always went out with every package. The readers of *People's Popular Monthly* enjoyed the embroidery patterns and especially liked the matching pillow cases and accessories. Simple cross-stitch designs such as Pine Tree and Tulips were popular, and the needlework items made money for the magazine. Pillow cases, for example, sold for \$1.28, twice the wholesale price. Management was quite satisfied with the profits and the reader response.²¹

The magazine also used the needlework products to promote circulation. In the January 1930 issue, a small advertisement offered a free Double T quilt pattern to anyone who sent for information about obtaining a free set of cross-stitch blocks. The reader then received a flyer stating the number of new magazine subscriptions that had to be sold in order to earn the extra premium.²² Soon Ayres and Ver Mehren collected twelve traditional quilt designs from various sources that the



magazine listed under "Patchwork Patterns" in February 1931.²³ Five paper patterns cost 25 cents, or stamped fabric for the whole top could be bought for \$2.50. Illustrations of the twelve "old-time favorites" debuted in May 1931, the final issue of the magazine.²⁴ A series of tiny dots formed the lines on Ver Mehren's paper patterns, just like lines stamped on fabric. The printed pattern of number five, Yankee Pride, has a pattern piece of unusual shape which requires snipping the seam allowance to set in the adjoining diamond and shows a lack of knowledge of traditional piecing methods.²⁵

During the winter of 1931–1932, Kathern and her husband, Carlton Chase Proper, Jr., the son of the magazine editor, moved to her home town of Wilton Junction in eastern Iowa. In one bedroom of her mother's house, "Lucretia King" continued to fill the orders that customers still addressed to *People's Popular Monthly*. She always included an advertising flyer for more of the Ver Mehren items from her columns.²⁶

By 1931, Ver Mehren understood which designs and products appealed to the customers. He had shown he was amenable to suggestions and quick to respond to trends. Most of all, he knew how to merchandise his goods and always followed up a contact with a sales circular for proven staple items. "Lucretia King" provided a feminine presence in the presentation of Ver Mehren's products to the public. The quilts in *People's Popular Monthly* had none of the originality of Ver Mehren's later designs, but the ordinary layouts with simple quilting were successful and easy to complete.

The Briardale Store News

In October 1930, eight months before the end of *People's Popular Monthly*, another Des Moines publication began making quilt patterns available to its readers. The Briardale chain of grocery stores published *The Briardale Store News*, its own monthly newspaper with features about food and homemaking interspersed with advertising. A quilt column continued fairly regularly for at least four years. Although no by-line accompanied the quilt column through the first winter, several factors point to former Des Moines resident, Carlie Sexton, as the writer.



The first clue that Sexton authored the Briardale feature is the title "Quaint Old Fashioned Quilts" which combines the words she frequently used in the titles of her books and articles. Secondly, the first column with this name begins with one of her poems and a slight variation of a paragraph in *Old Fashioned Quilts*, published in 1928.²⁷ Of course, someone could have "borrowed" this material, but how foolish to copy the work of a woman undoubtedly known in quilting circles in Des Moines! The rest of the writing in the column through the spring of 1931 is rough but still characteristic of Sexton's style. At this time her husband's printing business had failed, and her quilt work supported both of them. Writing copy for another Des Moines publication, while Ver Mehren made the patterns, would have been an easy, extra job. The patterns, at first titled simply "Briardale Designs," were from Ver Mehren; they had the same one hundred series numbers as the blocks in his later catalogs.²⁸

The early Briardale patterns were common patterns with the illustrations taken straight from the Ladies Art Company catalog pages. Customers bought the patterns through the paper or ordered fabric for a complete top already stamped with the geometric pieces for \$1.98 at a Briardale store. A kit for the Lone Star, number 140, in four shades of yellow sateen cost \$5.95. A black and white illustration of the star gave little idea of its impressive appearance in cloth, so Ver Mehren used a large color photograph of one-fourth of the actual quilt whenever possible. He pasted the picture to a pattern package copyrighted by Iowa Button and Pleating and sold about this time at Younker Brothers.²⁹ The department store also printed the picture in a color flyer that advertised sateen fabrics and "paper patterns for quilts."³⁰

In September, 1931, the *Briardale Store News* quilt column changed in name and style. Under the name "Carol Dean," it included more quilt patterns but no longer as pre-stamped fabric for the simple pieced blocks. Carol Dean, whose true identity is still unknown, soon offered a catalog of patterns, needlework items, and popular kits and also an album of quilting designs, both Ver Mehren products. With the catalog, quilters had a colorful reminder of all the good things available, ostensibly, through Briardale. The direction to "read the Art Needlework Book offer on page 7" in September 1931 is the earliest notice found so far for *Colonial Quilts and Decorative Needle Work*. Carol Dean



and the Briardale Stores persuaded quilters to buy “their” book for twenty-five cents by including a free quilt pattern of the customer’s choice that usually cost ten cents.³¹

Ver Mehren’s Catalogs—The Contents

Today’s quilters may have seen some of the vintage booklets that Hubert VerMehren created for the mail-order sale of his products. Few probably know the true source of the books or realize there were at least seven different versions.³² The striking appearance of the catalogs, with pages printed in orange and yellow, orange and green, green and purple, and orange and dark turquoise, could easily capture a quilter’s attention then and now.

The earliest version of *Colonial Quilts and Decorative Needle Work*, however, did not have color printing or the polish of the later books. This sixteen-page edition in black and white, dating from about 1930, began with quilt patterns derived from the Ladies Art Company and numbered from 101 to 134. Nine pages featured stamped aprons, baby dresses, bedroom sets, curtains, pictures, quilt blocks, rayon pillows and wool felt silhouette pillows. The catalog also included such non-needlework products as “Chardonez” rayon undergarments, silk hose, and window curtains.³³

The sixteen-page version of *Colonial Quilts and Decorative Needle Work* with colored illustrations eliminated the curtains, garments, and most of the stamped goods in favor of more attractive pages of quilt patterns. It can be documented from the fall of 1931 through the spring of 1932.³⁴ Three versions with the shorter title *Colonial Quilts* and a George Washington Mount Vernon Quilt on the back cover were also from 1932.³⁵ The first version sold just the patterns illustrated on the twenty-four pages. The next one expanded to thirty-two pages and listed additional patterns numbered from 200 to 253. The third version added more 200-series patterns to the list, including some for applique. Ver Mehren’s name and the copyright date of 1933 appeared inside the front cover of a fourth *Colonial Quilts* which advertised “Aunt Dinah’s Quilting Album” on the outside of the back cover. It repeated the previous layout of pages, but the colors differed, the



Figure 3. Covers of two of Ver Mehren's catalogs, from the author's collection.

pattern list included a few 300-series numbers, and the edges of the pages had been trimmed down to 5.5 x 8.5 inches. The same size *Hope Winslow's Quilt Book*, also from 1933, had different pages and colors but an identical list of patterns as *Colonial Quilts* (1933) except for an extra fourth digit in the identifying number (see figure 3).³⁶

Taken in order, the catalogs reveal the development of Ver Mehren's designs and his business. His Lone Star quilt was instrumental in both spheres. From the beginning of his foray into quilt patterns, he promoted the distinctive Lone Star design in solid shades of one color.



Page one of the very first catalog attributed the pattern to the skillful fingers of Betsy Ross, and suggested using “four shades of yellow, pink, orchid or blue.”³⁷ Perhaps it should have attributed the layout of the colors and the border composed of four narrow bands to Carlie Sexton. In 1923, she published a black-and-white photograph of her own Lone Star quilt with the words “Four colors or four shades of one color must be used.”³⁸ Her connection to the Briardale column and patterns may indicate an association with Ver Mehren and the development of his star quilt.

The first 1932 *Colonial Quilts* catalog included Ver Mehren’s color photograph of the Lone Star in shades of yellow and orange with clearly visible quilting making the soft texture of the sateen palpable. The same colors also worked very effectively in the companion picture of the Rising Sun quilt. Edged with four narrow border strips, this large single central motif was a somewhat more elaborate version of Ladies Art Company block number 266, Slashed Star. In these large medallion patterns, stamped fabric for pieced designs was put to its best use. The medallions required careful selection of fabric, and the kits supplied the most stylish colors and fabrics that one might not otherwise buy. They were economical in terms of fabric and labor. With the Lone Star the quilter was spared endless tracing around the same diamond template. The Rising Sun kit avoided tracing very large, complex shapes requiring great accuracy. Both considerations applied to the Star of France Quilt, photographed in three different colorways—yellows, pinks, and blues—for different editions of the catalogs.

In the second version of *Colonial Quilts*, different borders on several embroidered quilts departed from the previous straight edges. Gentle scallops curved along rich, elaborate quilting designs on the borders of Pansy Time and Blossom Time. A pieced petal border enhanced the flower theme for the May Day Flower Baskets. Pieced tulips connected by flowing bands of color reinforced the blowing stems and leaves of a tulips in baskets design (see figure 4). The tulip border was especially original and daring, and no doubt a challenge for the quilter to assemble and finish off. These new borders revealed a creative, artistic sense and embodied a useful marketing idea. Ver Mehren had always sold the straight strip borders as an optional, separate component of the quilt. Now he began showing the same complex pieced



Figure 4. Ver Mehren's Tulip quilt with embroidered blocks and separate pieced border.

borders on different quilts. In the case of the medallion format, standardized at 72 x 72 inches, all of the six-inch wide borders were interchangeable, and made the completed quilt measure 84 x 84 inches.

Ver Mehren added some new, fairly simple block designs to update the later catalogs. He called the popular rosettes of hexagons Martha Washington's Rose Garden. A pieced butterfly looked very contemporary. Some of the added patterns had been in *Capper's Weekly* in the late 1920s. The fact that the illustrations were exactly the same could lead to the assumption that Ver Mehren either produced the Capper patterns or simply copied the pictures. Possibly, however, he hired the illustrator who had done the Capper drawings to depict some of the common designs for him. With the rapid output of catalogs in 1932 and 1933, plus the many pictures that were appearing in newspapers at the same time, he needed professional help with the art work.³⁹



"Ready Cut Quilts," that is, kits with die-cut fabric pieces, enhanced the product line that Ver Mehren had to sell. He did not make this type of kit but may have ordered the ten designs from, or had them cut by, the Colonial Readicut Quilt Block Company of Kansas City, the forerunner of The Colonial Pattern Company, better known as Aunt Martha.⁴⁰

Finally, Ver Mehren's catalogs included several pages of his quilting designs sold either on paper to trace or as perforated patterns to be used with stamping powder. The customer could also order "albums" or collections of full-size quilting patterns that suggested which designs to use with different pieced patterns. A "Quilting Album" of fifty designs cost thirty-five cents. A larger collection in the "Master Quilting Album" sold for fifty cents.

Ver Mehren's Catalogs: Distribution

The rapid production of catalogs in 1932 coincided with a wider distribution of Ver Mehren's products. *Capper's Weekly* of Topeka, Kansas, several other Capper-published magazines, and *The Royal Neighbor* of Rock Island, Illinois, were among the first to offer mostly the tried and true good sellers in the stamped goods line to new audiences.⁴¹ In November 1932, and again in March 1933, *Successful Farming*, another Des Moines magazine with a circulation over one million, used several quilt patterns in feature-length articles and offered "*Successful Farming's* book of prize-winning colonial quilts and decorative needlework."⁴² All of these publications directed orders and payments be sent to their own addresses.

Ver Mehren changed the covers of his catalogs so that each distributor would appear to be the actual provider of the goods. Accustomed to having the same catalog pages bound with different covers for the two Button and Pleating Companies, VerMehren was already familiar with the technique. He went to great lengths to customize books for Gertrude May who sold needlework supplies at her "Art Studio" in St. Joseph, Missouri, and broadcast the "Old Quilter" radio program on station KFEQ. *Colonial Quilts* with Gertrude May's name printed on the outside of the front cover and inside the back cover contained



an extra page for her photograph, a message to her “radio friends,” a poem about “Sun Bonnet Sue” written by her mother, and her own order blank.⁴³ Most catalogs, however, had only the inside covers custom printed. Sometimes the distributor’s name was printed or simply hand stamped only on the outside front cover, especially on the last *Hope Winslow* books.

Colonial Quilts version two, with a *Des Moines Register* imprint, coincided with the beginning of Ver Mehren’s patterns in Iowa’s major newspaper on November 20, 1932. The offer of a free pattern for the Star of Bethlehem (an alternate name for the Lone Star) with the purchase of the twenty-five cent catalog enticed readers to send in their orders to 707 Locust Street in Des Moines. This address was Iowa Button and Pleating’s new location, only a few doors from *The Des Moines Register* at 715 Locust.⁴⁴

Syndication of Patterns in Newspapers

The quilt patterns appeared in *The Des Moines Register* with the by-line “Bettina.” This name had been used by two local residents for a series of Bettina cookbooks published from 1917 to 1924. Louise Bennett Weaver, a former high school domestic science teacher and editor of the *Register’s* household page in the early 1920s, collaborated with Helen Cowles LeCron, a poet, writer, and member of the family that owned and published *The Des Moines Register*.⁴⁵ The *Des Moines Register* and Tribune Syndicate distributed a recipe and household hints column under the Bettina name to other publications.⁴⁶ Either woman might have been connected to the pattern feature. It is clear that “Bettina” was not a part of Hubert Ver Mehren’s company.

Early in 1933, newspapers across the country began carrying the quilt feature from the *Des Moines Register* but without the Bettina name.⁴⁷ It included a drawing of the design, promotional commentary, and directions for order-ing. The boldly illustrated layouts portrayed traditional and popular patterns, as well as dazzling new and difficult design concepts. In the large central medallion format, designs such as The Eastern Star, Giant Dahlia, Glorious Chrysanthemum, Royal Aster, Russian Sunflower, and the Sirius Star required complex



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pieces and often had sixteen seams meeting together at the mid-point. Intricate borders repeated design elements from the central motifs, edging the quilt with sharp points or small curves. Although the description of Golden Dahlia touted it as “a modern design for the woman of today who wants to create a quilt that is new and different and will go down in quilt history as one of the new designs for 1933,” the Giant Dahlia became the most widely copied of all of Ver Mehren’s designs (see figure 5).⁴⁸ *Needlecraft* magazine and its associated catalog offered the pattern in 1935.⁴⁹ An entire book devoted to the pattern revived the design in 1983, and inexpensive imported Giant Dahlia quilts are now on the market.⁵⁰

The quilts made up of repeating units also presented striking vi-

Figure 5. The Giant Dahlia in medallion format designed by Hubert Ver Mehren.



Figure 6. Interlacing Squares with repeating pieced units designed by Hubert Ver Mehren.

sual graphic layouts (see figure 6). They, too, required careful piecing and challenged even the expert quilter. Ver Mehren's inexperience with quilting probably freed him to push the limits of the usual construction methods and exploit curves and angles. He based many of the patterns on geometric stars (Diamond Field Star, Glimmering Christmas Star, Milky Way Star) or curved flower petals (Easter Lily, Morning Glory, Painted Daisy). In others he combined the star form with a flower theme (Clematis, Cosmos, Poinsetta [sic], Rose Star, Star Bouquet). Stars and curves created his Golden Wedding Ring, a more complicated version of the Double Wedding Ring design in which six



pieced rings, not four, interlock around six pointed stars (see figure 7). The total number of Ver Mehren's quilt patterns at the end of the newspaper series approached three hundred.

No evidence has been found to indicate how Ver Mehren's quilt patterns were distributed to dozens of newspapers from 1933 through 1934. Although the Des Moines and Tribune Syndicate was probably the source, *Editor and Publisher* did not include quilt patterns among the features supplied from Des Moines. No other syndicate listed these patterns either, however.⁵¹

Most of the newspapers directed pattern orders to "Needleart Department" at 609 South Paulina Street in Chicago. Present research has not been able to determine anything about the Needleart Company at this Chicago address. Ver Mehren probably found some kind of set-up in Chicago to handle the distribution operation, perhaps as a way to distance his pattern business from the joint operation of the two Button and Pleating companies. Ver Mehren was involved, neverthe-

Figure 7. Golden Wedding Ring designed by Hubert Ver Mehren.



less, at least to the extent of corresponding with customers. When Lillian (Lillie) Carpenter ordered the kit for the center of a Rising Sun quilt, a typed response on Needleart Company letterhead dated April 13, 1933, was signed "HVM."⁵²

Only the Paulina Street address and the mention of the *Colonial Quilts* book have connected the newspaper columns to Hubert Ver Mehren. Because pattern collectors found a Nancy Lee by-line on some of the columns and the same name at the bottom of the introductory page of *Colonial Quilts* version four, they assumed she was a Ver Mehren alias or associate and, therefore, everything associated with Nancy Lee was his work. More likely, however, this was a person connected to the Chicago operation who added products from other sources. A few items with the Nancy Lee by-line, especially the designs for nursery rhyme quilts, were very different from Ver Mehren's style. They came from a catalog called *The Needle Art Vogue Style Book D*, which also had the Paulina Street address on the cover and "Nancy Lee's" signature and photo inside.⁵³ The "Nancy Lee" Needleart Company syndicate was probably responsible for adding this material to the newspaper columns, and the only way to tell which is which is by analyzing styles or knowing the items from the different catalogs.

Home Art Studios

So far, no mention has been made of Home Art Studios, the title usually associated with the designs of Hubert Ver Mehren, because the name did not appear on his patterns until about 1934, several years after he started producing them. The Home Art Company or Home Art Studios had been in existence, however, since about 1930 under the proprietorship of "Mary Jacobs," the maiden name of Ver Mehren's wife (see figure 8). The Home Art Company was the couple's home-based, retail mail-order business.⁵⁴ In a textbook example of mail-order advertising technique, she used small classified magazine ads for a quilting attachment, then followed up the contact with a free premium offer in return for additional orders for quilting hoops, patterns, or materials.⁵⁵

The very first *Colonial Quilts and Decorative Needlework* book was a



catalog for the Home Art Company with Mary Jacobs' name on the cover. It presented a variety of goods assembled from several wholesale sources, among them Iowa Button & Pleating. Mary gave a home and family touch to the catalog. She pointed out that finished needlework items would be good sellers for "church societies, guild, ladies' aid and bazaars" and asked customers to "write for my special plans for church organizations." The Mary Jacobs cover of the color version of *Colonial Quilts and Decorative Needlework* (1931–1932) bore the new business title, "Home Art Studios."

Although Mary Jacobs was listed as the proprietor of Home Art Studios, she and her husband worked closely together to develop their own enterprise separate from the Ver Mehren family's Button and Pleating operations. As the pattern business flourished, he moved the catalogs away from the Pleating company and identified himself with the products of his own creation. Ver Mehren copyrighted the 1933 publications under his name and a year later changed the quilt patterns from Iowa Button and Pleating wholesale products to also being Home Art Studios retail items. The first appearance of the Home Art Studios name printed on the pattern sheets occurred next to a 1934 copyright date.⁵⁶

During this same time period, in addition to juggling the two businesses, designing many new patterns for the newspapers, and dealing with rising costs as indicated by hand-stamped notices of price increases in some of the catalogs, Ver Mehren was also taking care of his wife and children. Mary had become ill with cancer in 1931. Trips to the Mayo Clinic for treatments were followed by periods of convalescence. Even while she was at the Rochester, Minnesota, hospital, Mary continued to help with bookkeeping as she did at home. They could not get domestic help because people feared cancer was contagious, so Hubert managed the household himself. Mary died at age 53 in 1937.⁵⁷

The syndicated newspaper feature disappeared by the end of 1934, but it had provided quilters with patterns just when they were learning about the Sears quilt contest for the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. Encouraged by the many cash prizes, quilters quickly accepted the challenge of stitching Ver Mehren's spectacular layouts, and several received top awards. Lillie Belle Shaffer Carpenter won the Philadelphia regional semifinals with "a show-stopping design," an orange and



Figure 8. Mary Jacobs Ver Mehren. Photograph courtesy of Mary VerMehren Fowler.

yellow Sunburst made from a Ver Mehren stamped kit. Susie Combs was first in the Atlanta Region with the Star of France design. Both quilts were part of the display of regional winners at the Century of Progress Exposition in 1934.⁵⁸ Another Sunburst quilt made by Helen Downs later demonstrated the pattern's continuing appeal when *Good Housekeeping* chose it as the Indiana winner in the 1977 Great Quilt Contest.⁵⁹

Through the rest of the decade of the 1930s, Ver Mehren supplied



some patterns for occasional ads and features in *Wallaces' Farmer* (23 November 1935), *Successful Farming* (December 1939), and the *Farmers Market Bulletin* in Des Moines, and in *Needlecraft* (July 1935) and *Rural Progress* (November 1935), magazines beyond the borders of Iowa. In March 1936, *The Farmer's Wife* magazine from St. Paul, Minnesota, featured a new design with triangles that created the appearance of concentric hexagons called A Trip to Egypt, available as a pattern or stamped on three grades of cloth.⁶⁰ In 1940, Ver Mehren copyrighted his Bible History Quilt made up of thirty-five very detailed embroidered blocks and fifty-two squares quilted with a cross and crown. He took great care with the placement of the incidents from the Old and New Testaments, the arrangement of the incidents in the life of Jesus into a central cross, and the selection of ecclesiastical colors. At the end of the instructions he added: "Our daily lives are influenced by our surroundings. What greater inspiration could we have than to have this pictorial story of the Life of Christ on the Cross as our daily reminder. Making this beautiful quilt will be an unforgettable period in your life."⁶¹

The pattern business declined to almost nothing in the 1940s, although Ver Mehren kept his remaining inventory. The Iowa Button and Pleating Company continued to offer such services as stitching monograms, embroidering jackets, and making pennants and flags for colleges and clubs. Ver Mehren usually bought United States flags from outside manufacturers, but when they guessed wrong about the arrangement of the stars after Alaska became the forty-ninth state in 1958, he designed and made the new flag to sell (see figure 9).⁶²

In the early 1950s the textile painting hobby of his secretary led Ver Mehren to design some stencils, sell supplies, and produce a catalog for the craft under the Home Art Studios label. The secretary, Marie Towle, lent her actual name to the marketing of the products. As part of her Pen Pal Club she offered a choice of a free painting board, painting tray, or brush to anyone who would send in five postcards pre-addressed to friends who might be interested in fabric painting. The phenomenal 25 percent response to this marketing promotion earned Ver Mehren recognition in *Advertising Age* magazine.⁶³

In 1964–1965 Ver Mehren tried to revive a few favorite medallions for the *Jay Bees* and *Little 'N Big* magazines. When there were delays in



Figure 9. Newspaper clipping, circa June 1958, courtesy of Dick Ver Mehren.

filling orders for the Giant Dahlia, he wrote to the readers about the difficulties in getting the old patterns re-made and commented:

Lots of people tell me that I am working too long and so forth, but if you are happy in what you are doing, and the people that use the patterns get



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pleasure and enjoyment from the patterns, I get the same satisfaction from making the pattern, gives the art that I seem to have been blessed with a chance to express itself.⁶⁴

He also announced there would be six new medallion designs coming in future issues. Two of them, Carol's Delight, named for his granddaughter, and Glorious Rising Sun appeared in *JayBees Magazine* in November 1964. Continuing problems with unfilled orders caused an end to the pattern offers a year later.⁶⁵

Ver Mehren continued to operate the Iowa Button and Pleating Company into his seventy-ninth year. On January 5, 1972, he was overcome by carbon monoxide from a defective chimney in his third-floor apartment above the business at 4301 Hubbell Avenue.⁶⁶ The city condemned and bulldozed the building and all its contents. Years earlier, fire in a storage building had destroyed the quilts that he used as display samples when he sold his patterns at the state fair.⁶⁷

Conclusion

So, who was Hope Winslow? The photograph of the person on page one of *Hope Winslow's Quilt Book* gives her more substance than the other women encountered only as a name (see figure 10). The attractive young woman in the picture was probably Mary Ver Mehren's younger sister, Lutie, who lived in Omaha.⁶⁸ In spite of her realistic presence, Hope Winslow is the most fictitious character of all. Nothing indicates that Lutie had any actual role in the business. The persona of Hope Winslow was created to appeal to the customers of the Iowa Button and Pleating Company and Home Art Studios.

The research has uncovered information about the people whose names have been better known than Hubert Ver Mehren. Nancy Lee remains the most obscure, and more information about her would be very enlightening. One woman whose name has never been mentioned in connection with Home Art Studios may have had the most significant role in Ver Mehren's work and deserves more attention. Carlie Sexton wrote for the *Briardale Store News*. Did she influence Ver Mehren's production of stamped patterns, especially the Lone Star in four shades of one color? Was she responsible, therefore, for starting Ver



Figure 10. Mary Ver Mehren's younger sister, Lutie, was probably the model for this picture of "Hope Winslow" in *Hope Winslow's Quilt Book*.

Mehren on the path of designing his original medallion and pieced quilts? Even if the sequence did start with Carlie Sexton, Hubert Ver Mehren's own artistic ability carried him forward to create these unique twentieth-century patterns.

Ver Mehren's commitment to hard work and his mastery of marketing and mail-order merchandising probably exceeded his talent as an artist. These attributes enabled him to produce a popular line of goods, sell to various retail outlets, test new items, and keep old customers coming back with new orders. He tried to please the custom-



ers, arranged for individualized catalogs, and set up seemingly endless combinations of price and product options for buyers. Unfortunately, circumstances beyond his control beset him just at the high point of his endeavors, which, coincidentally, occurred at the time of the 1933 Sears Quilt Contest. His wife's health, the deepening Depression, and perhaps some problems inherent in the many ways patterns were ordered brought an end to the national exposure. Also, many of his patterns may have intimidated the average quilter, for even though they were drafted accurately, they required an expert with a needle to assemble the complicated shapes. These original designs were fifty years ahead of their time. Then with the decline in quilting in the 1940s and 1950s, his pattern business eventually faded away.

Ver Mehren's contributions were never fully recognized. The Iowa Button and Pleating Company was primarily a service and wholesale operation where the proprietor did not identify himself with the products. About eight years after beginning to stamp goods for embroidery at Iowa Button and Pleating, Ver Mehren did begin to label his quilt patterns with the Home Art Studios name. Although he used female names and personae as marketing tools throughout his career, it is significant that he did not use such a device for his patterns, as some other companies did. Instead, he chose the business name associated with his wife. The Home Art Studios label should bring to mind the contributions of Mary Jacobs Ver Mehren as well as the achievements of her husband. But just as Marie Webster's designs are known by her name and not by the "Practical Patchwork" title of her pattern company, Hubert Ver Mehren's name should now be added to his patterns. I believe the best way of giving proper credit is to continue with the words "Home Art Studios" but *precede* them with the name of the man who added some amazing, original designs to our quilting tradition. The designation should be: Hubert Ver Mehren/Home Art Studios.



Notes and References

1. For a discussion of the Colonial Revival in connection with quilts and patterns, see Jeanette Lasansky, "The Colonial Revival," *Pieced by Mother*, ed. Jeanette Lasansky (Lewisburg, PA: Oral Traditions Project, 1987), 104–15.
2. For more information about the proliferation of quilt-pattern companies in the early twentieth century, see Merikay Waldvogel, "Quilt Design Explosion of the Great Depression," *On the Cutting Edge*, ed. Jeannette Lasansky (Lewisburg, PA: Oral Traditions Project, 1994), 84–95.
3. Cuesta Benberry, letter to author, 19 September 1997, and lecture "Major Influences on the 20th Century Quilt Scene" at the 20th Century Quilts, 1900–1970: Women Make Their Mark Symposium, Paducah, KY, 28 June 1997.
4. Merikay Waldvogel kindly loaned a portion of Mildred Dickerson's Home Art Studios material for examination by the author.
5. U.S. Census for Iowa, 1900; Mary Ver Mehren Fowler, letter to author, 10 June 1997. Ver Mehren's daughter and son have graciously shared family information in letters, telephone calls, and interviews.
6. Mary Ver Mehren Fowler, interview with author, 11 July 1997.
7. *Ibid.*, also telephone conversations with author, 1 November and 23 November 1999.
8. Although both Button and Pleating companies used "Inc." after their names and listed officers, neither Nebraska nor Iowa has any record of official incorporation.
9. *Des Moines City Directory*, 1922.
10. *Style Book of Iowa Button & Plaiting Co., Inc.* (Des Moines, IA: n.d.), author's collection; *Style Book of Ideal Button & Plaiting Co., Inc.* (Omaha, NE: n.d.), collection of Shirley McElderry.
11. *Ibid.*, 72.
12. Mary Fowler remembers first being at the State Fair at the age of three when her brother was born. Both children recall helping their father at the fair in the 1930s. Quilts made from his patterns were on display in his booth. Fowler, 23 November 1999; Dick Ver Mehren, telephone conversation with author, 23 May 1997.
13. "Des Moines One of 6 Publishing Centers in U.S.," *Des Moines Tribune*, 28 November 1927.
14. Susan Price Miller, "Carlie Sexton and Her Quilt Pattern Business," *Uncoverings 1996*, ed. Virginia Gunn (San Francisco: American Quilt Study Group, 1996), 33–35.
15. Lucretia was Kathern's middle name, and King came from her mother's maiden name. Kathern married Carlton Chase Proper, Jr., who sold advertising for his father's *People's Popular Monthly*. After they left Iowa for California, she contributed free-lance articles to several magazines, including many for Caroline B. King at *Country Gentleman*. Kathern Ayres Proper, telephone interview with author, 29 October 1999.



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16. Lucretia King, "February Fancy Work," *People's Popular Monthly*, February 1928, 19.
17. Kathern Ayres Proper, telephone interview with author, 7 November 1999.
18. Proper, 29 October and 7 November 1999.
19. Mary Fowler, 23 May and 11 July 1997.
20. "Mother's Old Fashioned Flower Garden Quilt Color Chart," (Omaha: Ideal Button & Pleating Co., 1931); collection of Wilene Smith. A flyer, "Colorful Cross Stitch Quilt Blocks" (Omaha: Ideal Button and Pleating Co., n.d.), in the collection of Wilene Smith, further illustrates the connection between the two businesses.
21. Proper, 7 November 1999.
22. *People's Popular Monthly*, January 1930, p. 30. A one-page flyer offered the premiums either free or at reduced cost with various subscription totals. Collection of Wilene Smith.
23. Proper, 7 November 1999.
24. Clipping from the Collection of Mildred Dickerson owned by Merikay Waldvogel. Kathern Ayres Proper supplied the date. The magazine company defaulted on loan payments and was bankrupt. "Proper Named Firm Receiver," *Des Moines Tribune*, 18 May 1931.
25. Yankee Pride pattern from the Collection of Mildred Dickerson owned by MerikayWaldvogel.
26. Four-page flyer with a return address for Lucretia King at Wilton Junction, Iowa, courtesy of Teddy Pruett and Shirley McElderry. Kathern Ayres Proper bought the goods at wholesale prices and sold them retail.
27. [Carlie Sexton] "Quaint Old Fashioned Quilts," *Briardale Store News*, November 1930, courtesy of Shirley McElderry; Carlie Sexton, *Old-Fashioned Quilts* (Wheaton, IL: by the author, 1928), 7.
28. For more information about Carlie Sexton, see Miller, 29–62.
29. Envelope and pattern of the Sunburst Design [Lone Star] with the number 25, indicating a production date of about 1930 or 1931 when Ver Mehren first started printing patterns for pieced designs. Collection of Shirley McElderry.
30. Color flyer from Younker Brothers, author's collection, thanks to Shirley McElderry.
31. Carol Dean, "Briardale Brings You These Feminine Keepsakes of American Traditions," *Briardale Store News*, September 1931, 3, courtesy of Cuesta Benberry. The first available example of the actual book offer documenting the title as *Briardale's Book of Colonial Quilts and Decorative Needlework* is from January 1932, courtesy of Shirley McElderry. The September 1932 issue advertised the next version of the catalog with the shortened title of *Colonial Quilts*, author's collection.
32. The author has a collection of nine books. Other examples and photocopies have been loaned by Shirley McElderry, Xenia Cord, Carolyn Miller, and by Merikay Waldvogel from her personal collection and her Collection of Mildred Dickerson, making a total of eighteen books and covers examined for this paper.
33. *Mary Jacob's Book of Colonial Quilts and Decorative Needle Work* (Des Moines: Home Art Co., ca. 1930), author's collection. The date is based on the series of



quilt patterns shown in consecutive numerical order from which the Briardale patterns were selected, beginning in the fall of 1930.

34. In addition to the *Briardale Store News*, an early notice appeared in the *Pennsylvania Farmer*, February 1932.

35. 1932 was the 200th anniversary of the birth of George Washington.

36. More variations may exist. A comparison of two copies of *Gertrude May's Book of Colonial Quilts* revealed different patterns in the bottom right corner of page 7. Author's collection and the Collection of Mildred Dickerson owned by Merikay Waldvogel.

37. *Mary Jacob's Book of Colonial Quilts and Decorative Needle Work*, 1.

38. Carlie Sexton, *Old-Time Patchwork Quilts* (Des Moines, IA: Successful Farming Publishing Co., ca. 1923), 16.

39. Some of Ver Mehren's later original designs appear to have been styled in the same manner as the Capper illustrations.

40. For the history of the companies of Jack and Clara Tillotson, see Barbara Brackman, "Mid-western Pattern Sources," in *Uncoverings 1980*, ed. Sally Garoutte (Mill Valley, CA: American Quilt Study Group, 1980) 7–10. Colonial inaugurated their long-running series of needlework pages in *The Royal Neighbor* with five "Ready Cut Quilt Blocks for Quilts and Pillows" in October 1930. Ruby McKim also offered Ready Cut kits in *The Royal Neighbor* beginning in January 1931. Carol Beeding, head of public relations for Royal Neighbors of America, a fraternal life insurance company in Rock Island, IL, graciously copied all needlework material from the monthly magazines between 1926 and 1935 for this research.

41. Microfilms of *Capper's Weekly* and the Capper-owned *Pennsylvania Farmer* were surveyed from the late 1920s to the mid-1930s. Through the resourcefulness of Linda Glendening, the Pella, Iowa, public library obtained reels of microfilm and other materials through interlibrary loan. Her interest and help kept this research going forward and are much appreciated.

42. *Successful Farming*, November 1932, 9.

43. *Gertrude May's Book of Colonial Quilts*, author's collection.

44. *Des Moines City Directory*, 1934.

45. Annual entries in the *Des Moines City Directory* chronicle Louise B. Weaver's employment. Helen Cowles LeCron, "Other Writers of Promise and Fulfillment," *A Book of Iowa Authors by Iowa Authors*, Johnson Brigham, ed. (Des Moines, IA: Iowa State Teachers Association, 1930) [235]. The cookbooks featured recipes interwoven with narratives about Bettina and her husband, family and friends, as well as poems to introduce each section.

46. "Annual Directory of Syndicate Features," *Editor and Publisher*, 5 June 1926.

47. Beginning dates: January 22 in the *Wheeling News*, courtesy of Zoe Smith; January 24 in the *Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*; February 20 in the *Wichita Beacon* and *Kansas City Star*, cited in Wilene Smith, *Home Art Studios. Time Line and Reference List*, ©September 22, 1995; March 13 in the *Columbus Dispatch*. Edna Paris Ford in "Those Beautiful Home Art Studio [sic] Quilt Patterns," *Quilt World Omnibook*, Spring, 1981, 10, reported the patterns were in "at least 96 newspapers and magazines throughout the country."



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48. Golden Dahlia description from *Hope Winslow's Quilt Book* (Des Moines, IA: H. Ver Mehren, 1933), 2.
49. *Needlecraft, The Home Arts Magazine*, July 1935, 24; *Needlecraft . . . Book of Materials* (catalog), ca. 1935, author's collection.
50. Susan Aylsworth Murwin and Suzzy Chalfant Payne, *The Quick and Easy Giant Dahlia Quilt* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc: 1983); ad for \$39.99 "Green Dahlia" quilt at Younkers Department Store, Des Moines, IA, August 1997, author's collection.
51. *Editor and Publisher* included an "Annual Directory of [Syndicate] Features" in one issue each year. The years 1926, 1927, 1930–1934 were examined.
52. Letter courtesy of Merikay Waldvogel. The letterhead of the Needleart Company stated that it was "Not Inc."
53. *The Needle Art Vogue Style Book D* (Chicago: Needleart Co., n.d.), courtesy of Cuesta Benberry.
54. Fowler, 10 June 1997.
55. Ad, *Better Homes & Gardens*, February 1935, 62, courtesy of Shirley McElderry. Flyer from Home Art Co., n.d., signed by Mary Jacobs, courtesy of Wilene Smith.
56. "The Gorgeous Chrysanthemum Quilt," printed with the words "Copyright 1934 Home Art Studios Des Moines Iowa" in an envelope with a *Des Moines Register* clipping of the pattern dated 11 March 1934, collection of Shirley McElderry.
57. Mary Fowler, 23 May 1997. Mary remembers her father with great admiration: "He was quite a guy, fair, and believed in hard work." Fowler, 23 November 1999.
58. Merikay Waldvogel and Barbara Brackman, *Patchwork Souvenirs of the 1933 World's Fair* (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1993), 39–42, 57, 97.
59. "51 Prize-Winning Quilts," *Good Housekeeping*, March 1978, 128.
60. Original pattern of A Trip to Egypt copyrighted 1936, courtesy of Shirley McElderry.
61. Original pattern of the Bible History Quilt, author's collection.
62. "A Pattern For New U.S. Flag," newspaper clipping, ca. June 1958, courtesy of Dick Ver Mehren.
63. Ver Mehren, 23 May 1997.
64. "A letter from Van. . . ." in the column "An Old-Fashioned Quilting Party," Claudine Moffatt, *Jay Bees Magazine*, September 1964, n.p., courtesy of Cuesta Benberry.
65. [Claudine Moffatt], *Jay Bees Magazine*, November 1965, n.p., courtesy of Cuesta Benberry.
66. Hubert Ver Mehren obituary, *Des Moines Tribune*, 7 January 1972, 9.
67. Ver Mehren, 23 May 1997; Fowler, 23 May 1997.
68. Fowler, 10 June 1997. Mary knows nothing about "Hope Winslow" but she believes the picture is of her Aunt Lutie.