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Fannie and the Busy Bees

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Fannie Springer Schumacher of Mitchell, Nebraska, helped organize the Busy Bee Club in 1920. The club's goals included moral improvement and sharing information, but the primary activity of the twice-monthly meetings was stitching quilts (most often in Fannie's roomy wood-frame farmhouse).

Nearly seven decades of club minutes are still in existence. Analysis of these extensive records provided valuable insights into the role of rural women's clubs of the early twentieth century. The detailed records allow the Busy Bees to serve as a representative case study for the numerous quilting and social clubs that remain undocumented. Clubs such as the Busy Bees provided education, recognition, and companionship for their members. The clubs also served as a vehicle for performing charitable activities within the local community, as well as directing rural women's response to national events such as the Depression and World War II.

The Busy Bee Club of Mitchell, Nebraska, was formed in 1920, and club members met twice a month for nearly seventy years. Sharing information, building friendships, and moral improvement were goals of the club, and quilting together provided hours of activity shared by the club members. Surviving ledger books give a record of seven decades of stitching quilts together. The minutes clearly show how quilting clubs provided companionship, emotional support, and artistic recognition on a local level. The Busy Bee records also provide rare insights into rural groups that remain undocumented. The minutes reveal how these clubs functioned as a vehicle for rural women to serve local charitable needs, as well as respond to national events, such as the Depression and World War II. While many rural women's

clubs were formed in the early years of the twentieth century, with quilting as the primary social and charitable pastime, it is very rare that such a complete record of a club's history survived. The records left by the Busy Bees provide rare insights into rural women's clubs, allowing the Busy Bees to serve as a representative case study for countless groups that remain undocumented.

The Charity of Women

There is a long history of women gathering in church groups, sewing circles, and other charitable organizations to serve the needs of their communities and their nation, while at the same time providing social and spiritual outlets (see figure 1). For example, the tremendous response to the needs of Northern and Southern soldiers in the Civil War years generated the nationwide formation of aid groups, largely made up of women.[1] Throughout the war, women worked tirelessly at home to stitch quilts and clothing for Union and Confederate troops. They donated millions of dollars of goods to the war effort, and both governments depended heavily on their patriotic work. While the U. S. Sanitary Commission was the leading Northern agency for coordinating local volunteer work, more than 20,000 soldiers' aid societies formed to help the soldiers.[2]

During the Civil War, women's motivations for joining voluntary associations often centered on patriotism and an immediate need to help their own soldier husbands and sons, and, in the case of Northern women, there were strong antislavery sentiments. After the war, women turned to work for suffrage and the powerful temperance movement, embodied in the Woman's Christian Temperance Union.[3] The humble sewing circles evolved into national societies that gave women a format for effecting social change on a national platform at a time when notions of proper behavior barred women from the public sphere.

The women's clubs of the early decades of the twentieth century, with their roots in early women's societies as well as the antislavery and temperance crusades, continued to give women a vehicle for making changes in their communities, righting social wrongs, and

learning new skills, as well as gaining the support and friendship of their neighbors. Women's historian Karen J. Blair noted that membership in social and voluntary clubs gave women a powerful voice for change.[4]

By the twentieth century, hundreds of special interest clubs had formed as women began to organize and meet for social cooperation, political influence, educational or charitable ideals, and, of course, to quilt. And because women's clubs filled so many of the needs and goals of the women at that time, Blair believed that "clubs held a far more significant place in women's lives than men's clubs and organizations did for men."[5] In the early years of the twentieth century, women were entering the work force, while lower birthrates and improved technology gave women more free time. These tremendous changes resulted in women working more agressively and openly

Figure 1. Ladies Aid at Grandma Fishers, 1909. There are sixteen women and one lovely young girl, standing to the extreme right, all unidentified, along with sixteen young children (seated on a tied patchwork quilt) in attendance at this gathering of the Ladies Aid in the Platte River Valley. Photograph courtesy of The North Platte Valley Museum in Gering, Nebraska.

to effect social change.[6] In comparison to men's social and fraternal clubs, women's clubs have historically been the stronger organizing vehicle for promoting social change, especially in regard to abolition, suffrage, and women and children's rights.

In 1914, the Smith-Lever Act formed a partnership between land-grant colleges and the United States Department of Agriculture to provide instruction in agriculture and home economics.[7] Agents from the universities attended newly formed extension clubs and gave instruction in home economics-related subjects, including sewing and quilting. Membership in these rural Extension Homemakers clubs swelled, making them one of the largest women's organizations in the United States.[8]

The Busy Bee Club of Mitchell, Nebraska, was typical of the hundreds of clubs formed in the early years of the twentieth century. In fact, "busy bee" was a popular name, and it is likely that there were busy bee clubs in every state in the country. The Busy Bees of Mitchell focused on quilting. That was the typical activity during their day-long meetings. But the most remarkable aspect of the club is the existence of nearly seventy years of club records (see figure 2).

While clubs often kept weekly records of their meetings, very few of those records still exist. Fannie Schumacher, who was instrumental in organizing the club, saved the record books, which eventually passed on to her granddaughter, Arlene Buffington. The journals depict the business of the club, quilts that were stitched, deaths of the members and births of their babies, marriages, illnesses, local events, such as devastating prairie and home fires, and national affairs, especially World War II. The books reveal endearing humor and universal jealousies (there was great competition with neighboring clubs), charity and caring, and the deep affection and friendships between the Busy Bee Club members, friendships and affiliations that extended through three generations.

Fannie Mae Leonard Springer Schumacher

Fannie Schumacher was an organizing force in the inception of the club. She was a teacher and a midwife, and a lifelong quilter. She was

Figure 2. Busy Bee Club record books. Courtesy of Arlene Buffington.

a typical product of the homesteading families of the midwestern prairies, but she also had extensive ties with her neighbors, and a strong feeling of responsibility to her community.

Fannie Mae was born on June 20, 1877, in Grant City, Missouri, one of nine children—seven girls and two boys—born to James and Sarah Leonard. When Fannie was nine years old, she traveled west with her family in a covered wagon to a new home in southwest Nebraska. Fannie later recalled that their wagon was drawn by a team of mares, and the children walked much of the way, taking turns leading the family milk cow.[9] It is probable that for most of the five-hundred-mile trip across Nebraska the family followed the old route of the Oregon Trail, along the North Platte River past Courthouse Rock and Chimney Rock, finally coming to the end of their journey near Scottsbluff in the extreme western region of Nebraska.

The Leonard family settled in the Gering Valley and made a home in a dugout for their first years in Nebraska. The roof was made of poles covered with sod, and it leaked for days after every rain. Fannie's mother planted moss rose on the roof and, until cold weather arrived, the flowers were a bit of welcome color in the barren prairie.[10] While living here, Fannie attended school through the eighth grade. She enjoyed school and learning, and because the Gering area did not offer any higher education, Fannie attended the eighth grade for a second year.[11]

Following Fannie's second eighth-grade graduation in 1894, the Leonards moved about a dozen miles northwest to Mitchell Valley, Nebraska. Fannie got a job and taught all eight grades for a year in a country school. The following year she married twenty-seven-year-old William Arthur Springer, and their only child, a daughter named Retta, was born in 1896.[12]

William was a handsome cowboy who had lived in the West for much of his life, first in Idaho and Oregon, and later, on a large horse ranch in southeast Wyoming near Laramie Peak. With his brothers Henry and John, he raised horses for the army and for farmers and ranchers. At one time they owned a thousand horses.[13]

In 1890 William bought a section of land in western Nebraska from Louis A. Pochon, a fur trader. William lived in the old sod house on the farm, and upon his marriage to Fannie, she took up housekeeping

in the soddie. Having been raised in the country, Fannie was not daunted by the hardships of rural life. One danger she calmly dealt with were the poisonous rattlesnakes that were common in the fields and around her sod house. Fannie said that you should always kill the snakes, as their bite could be lethal.[14]

Fannie was a small woman, only five feet tall, weighing ninety-two pounds, but she was strong and robust, and she enjoyed the country life. She helped her husband with the farm and ranch work, which included tending to their large herds of sheep, horses, and cattle on open range.[15]

Fannie was also domestic; she enjoyed cooking, and did not mind the taxing work of cooking for all of the ranch hands. Fannie's sense of humor was evident one April Fool's Day as she got up early to make breakfast, because in the first pan of biscuits she hid pieces of cotton. Normally, the ranch hands loved her light and fragrant biscuits, but on this morning they had great difficulty chewing. After observing their discomfort, a grinning Fannie wished them all a happy

Figure 3. Fannie and William Springer in front of their two-story farm house, ca. 1905. Photograph courtesy of Arlene Buffington.

April Fool's Day, and served another pan of biscuits—without the added cotton![16]

After nine years in the sod house, William built a lovely two-story farmhouse for his wife and young daughter, Retta, and with the expanded quarters Fannie had room for quilting, her other great interest (see figure 3). Through the long, cold winters, and with less out-of-doors work to be done, Fannie always had a quilt on the frame. Like many early farmhouses, the upstairs bedrooms had no heat, and it required many quilts to keep out the piercing Nebraska winds.[17]

Fannie did fine hand piecing and quilting, but for the heavy use required in a wagon, bedroll, or in the horse camp in Wyoming, she pieced crazy quilts of denim and heavy woolens cut from worn clothing. These camp quilts were tied, not quilted. They were functional quilts, created for warmth and durability. Since sheep were raised on the Springer farm, Fannie had access to wool, which she sometimes used as batting for these heavy-duty quilts.

Since the wool quilts could not be washed, because hot water would shrink the wool to nothing, Fannie may have cleaned her quilts the same way as most quilters of her time. The quilts were taken apart, the wool batting was removed, and the top and bottom were gently washed. The quilt back was then restretched on the quilting frames, the wool batting was recarded and laid down, the top added, and the whole quilt was retied and rebound.[18] The process involved a great deal of tedious work, but in Fannie's time, fabric and quilts were never in such plentiful supply that any could be wasted (see figure 4).

In summertime, the quilting frames were moved to the big front porch of Fannie's house where quiltings became an occasion for family and neighbor women to gather and pass a few hours visiting and stitching. Fannie's house was a center for the community. William was one of the founders of the Mitchell Irrigation Ditch, and served as president of the Ditch Board for many years. Fannie and William gave land for a county school that was named Springer School in their honor. Fannie also served as midwife for her family and neighbors.

In 1917, William died of a ruptured appendix. Two years later Fannie married William Schumacher, a widowed neighbor and friend she had known for many years. After Fannie's second marriage, she had more time for quilting, and these were the years when the greatest

Figure 4. String Star Quilt, ca. 1900–1910, 86″ x 71″. Quilt courtesy of Arlene Buffington. Photo by J. Keith Schreiber. Fannie pieced her string star blocks with odd-shaped scraps of leftover fabrics. This scrap quilt is typical of the many utilitarian quilts that Fannie stitched for heavy use on the farm or at the horse ranch in Wyoming. Many of these heavy quilts had woolen batting.

number of her quilts were produced. Some of the surviving quilts that she stitched during that time in her life include an Arrow Quilt, Bars, a scrap or charm Clamshell, Crazy Quilt, Cross-stitch Star, Dresden Plate, Hexagon Star, Jacob's Ladder, a Lone Star for her granddaughter's hope chest, Pinwheel, Pinwheel Variation, Star, String Star, and an original design strip-pieced four-patch block with curved green sashing (see plate 3). Fannie stitched many more quilts that were used up through the years.

The Busy Bee Club

As a consequence of the Schumachers' community involvement, and because of Fannie's love of people and her great hospitality, Fannie and her second husband were well known and liked in their community. And as an outgrowth of her wide circle of friends, Fannie gathered together a group of women in her area, and sometime in 1920, she held the first meeting of the Busy Bee Club in her parlor (see figure 5).

In the early decades of this century, rural women stayed at home. Their days were filled with long hours of work, caring for large families, and doing heavy housework and farming chores. Church on Sundays and an occasional trip to town for supplies and groceries was the extent of their social life. A chance to gather once or twice a month to visit with other women provided a much-needed social outlet. A woman from a similar rural club in Indiana commented, "Everything was interesting to us, because we weren't used to being out in the public with other people."[19] For the Busy Bees, as well as for many other rural clubs, quilting was the main activity for the meetings.

The women chose names for their clubs that reflected their mission or the region where they lived, and some club names were purely whimsical. In the Midwest, "Sunflower" was a popular designation, and there were several Sunflower clubs in Nebraska. The Gingham Gals met in Rush County, Indiana. In Beatrice, Nebraska, HMS stood for "Help My Sister," and SOS, a women's group from the Scottsbluff Methodist Church, is an acronym for "Sisters of the Skillet." The members of the TOB Club would never tell what their club initials

represented. When asked, they would only reply, "That's our business!"[20]

Wanda Mowry, a resident of Gering, Nebraska, and a friend of the Busy Bee Club members, worked as an extension agent for many years. She noted that women's clubs seemed to be extremely popular in that area. In fact, at one time there were thirty-nine women's clubs in Scottsbluff County.[21] Over the years the Busy Bees often invited the members of the nearby Sunflowers or the Sunshine Club to attend meetings for a special friendship gathering.

Many of these early women's clubs were formed exclusively for quilting. State quilt documentation projects have recorded the existence of quilting groups that have spanned decades and several generations. One quilting club that may hold the record for longevity is the WWW Club, the Wea Willing Workers, of Wea, Indiana. Formed in 1887, the club now has some members who are granddaughters of the original founders. In the early years of the century, the quilting

Figure 5. The Busy Bee Club, ca. 1925–1930. Fannie Springer Schumacher is third from the left, wearing a dark colored dress; other Busy Bee Club members are not identified. Photograph courtesy of Arlene Buffington.

frames were transported to the meetings in Mrs. Jane Stidham's horse and buggy. For over a century, the WWW club members have made clothing, linens, and quilts for charitable institutions and disaster victims.[22] The Ring Quilters of Oakland, Nebraska, have been in existence for over fifty years.[23] Other quilting clubs have enjoyed similar longevity.

The enthusiastic group of women that met that day at Fannie's house in 1920 chose a name for their club: they would be the Busy Bees. They met twice a month, on the first and third Wednesdays. The meeting location traveled to a different member's house each meeting, sometimes determined by drawing numbers. Everyone took turns holding club, even Mrs. Emma Godby who lived in a sod house.

The hostess was required to serve a lunch consisting of at least "two eats, drink and pickles."[24] Dues were one dollar a year, the club colors were green and gold, and the official flower was the "goldenrod." In an effort to keep the friendly atmosphere of the rural community, the last club by-law stated that, "Any member who comes dressed in anything but their house dress will be fined."[25] If a member violated any of the by-laws or failed to answer the roll call a fine was collected and the money was stored in a Calumet Baking Powder tin (see figure 6).

The Busy Bee Club was not formed solely for quilting; intellectual stimulation was also a consideration (the club motto was "Nothing is impossible to a willing mind"). Quilting was the main activity, however, once the roll calls and business items were completed. And roll calls were a most important and creative aspect of the gathering. Each meeting had a theme for roll call, such as My Favorite Book, My Most Embarrassing Moment, or The Where and Why in Kitchen Arrangement. In March the topic sometimes was to tell an Irish joke, and in July club members could respond with a patriotic quotation.

On August 15, 1928, a recipe was to be shared for the roll call, but as club secretary, Irene Lewis, noted in the minutes, "as no one cooks in this club we got only two responses, other than present." On March 20, 1929, the roll call topic was Hints for Spring Housecleaning. Mrs. Lewis recorded, "Nearly everyone responded with helpful hints. One or two don't clean house."

Figure 6. Busy Bee Club "President's Box" items: Calumet Baking Powder tin for dues and fines, gavel made by Ione Campbell's husband, cheese box for pencils for games, autograph book, notebooks, 1936 copy of *The Main Motion: A Primer of Parliamentary Practice* by Awana H. K. Slaker. Other items often found in the President's Box were yearbooks, guest books, song books, sayings for roll call, and get well or sympathy cards in the event of a death or illness in a member's family. Courtesy of Arlene Buffington.

A Fine Lot of Quilting Was Did

When all of the club business was completed, the ladies got down to the quilting (see figure 7). Sometimes there were several who had quilts ready to quilt, or blocks to set together. On May 5, 1927, a motion was made to piece quilts for Caddie Howard and Retta Foreman, Fannie's daughter, at the next meeting. The following month they put Martha Spear's quilt blocks together. They also "fixed" a quilt for Lucille Spear who had been "burned out."

On November 11, 1925, the members decided that they would "work for some member each club day." By "work" it meant that the women would piece or quilt for the hostess, or for designated individuals of the club or the community. Because there were formal rules for the proceedings of the club, there are often motions recorded in the club minutes reflecting that at the next meeting, the members would quilt for a particular person. On February 1, 1928, there is a notation regarding a "motion made & seconded to appoint a committee to see about the quilt blocks of Martha Spears' & fix a quilt for Lucille Spear." These quilts were in addition to the quilts made for Martha and Lucille the previous spring.

Numerous meeting minutes reflect that the day was spent in quilting. On January 18, 1928, an "all day meeting was had. And was spent in quilting." On the first day of the following month Secretary Idelle Smith also noted that "an all day meeting was had and spent in quilting," or as Hazel Casson wrote in 1930, "a fine lot of quilting was did." Some ladies passed part of their time at the meeting doing hand sewing, but again and again, the minutes reflect that the day was spent in quilting or piecing quilt blocks.

Interviews with families of the Busy Bees indicate that quilting was the main activity of the club days, and because it was assumed that everyone knew that they were quilting, most of the events recorded in the years of club minutes related the activities that changed: officer nominations, subject of the roll call and demonstrations, and work for special events such as summer picnics or the annual banquet for the husbands (see figure 8).

The November 21, 1928, meeting was held at Lucy Springer's home. (Lucy was Fannie's former sister-in-law.) The roll call topic was

Figure 7. Clamshell Quilt, ca. 1900–1910, 74″ x 59″. Quilt courtesy of Arlene Buffington. Photograph by J. Keith Schreiber. Busy Bee Club member Fern Elliott Nolan hand-pieced her scrap or charm Clamshell quilt with 410 shell pieces.

Figure 8. The Busy Bee Club at a summer picnic, 1937. Fannie is standing, second from the right. Photograph courtesy of Arlene Buffington.

"What we were Thankful for." Secretary Irene Lewis, in her uniquely droll style, recorded that the "Club quilted for Mrs. Springer what time they didn't talk."

Other members of Fannie's family were Busy Bee Club members. Lucy and Dora Springer, another of Fannie's former sisters-in-law, attended the club meetings and quilted with their family and neighbors. Fannie's daughter Retta Elliott was also a quilter and a Busy Bee Club member. Retta's four daughters own many of Retta's and Fannie's handstitched quilts. One hilarious memory shared by Fannie's granddaughters is of the times they entertained the Busy Bee Club. Eleanor dressed as Sunbonnet Sue with a bonnet and gingham dress, and Arlene dressed as Overall Jim wearing overalls and a straw hat, and they sang and danced to the popular quilting song "Sunbonnet Sue and Overall Jim." A decade later the two younger sisters, Clela and Donna, were again recruited to repeat the performance for the Busy Bee ladies. Today the family is proud of two of the pink and green Sunbonnet quilts made by Aunt Pearl Elliott, sister of Fannie's son-in-law.

At a February 22, 1929, meeting, Fannie notified the club-goers that

the next meeting would be at her house, and reminded them all to "bring needles & thimbles." Perhaps because she had such a spacious house, with large rooms to hold the quilt frames, the meetings seemed to be held very often at Fannie's home. She hosted the Busy Bee Club meeting again on April 3, 1929, when the ladies pieced quilt blocks for a hope chest for Lyda Maple's daughter, Edna. The roll call topic was "Garden making hints," but Mrs. Lewis wrote in the minute book: "very few responded. Perhaps as this is a farm women's club they don't make gardens." More likely, they all had gardens and assumed no one needed hints. Mrs. Lewis's statement in the minutes was perhaps in jest.

Club membership varied over the years between approximately twenty to forty members. In the winter there were many times when fewer members could attend club because the rural dirt roads became snowy or muddy and travel was impossible. And because the Busy Bees were "farm women," there were many times when the work of harvesting and putting up food and simply caring for large families prohibited the absence of the farm wife for a whole day. Sometimes a whole day away visiting and quilting with other club members was a luxury that could not be squeezed into the daily schedule of heavy work.

It is also interesting to analyze the attendance records of the club, especially during the early years after it was formed. Even though there were several dozen Busy Bee members listed in the record books, most often attendance at a meeting was between ten and twenty women. One interesting aspect was the number of children also attending the meetings. These were the days of large families, and day care had not yet become commonplace, so, of course, the mothers brought their younger children with them to club. The minute books reflect that children often outnumbered adults. On June 6, 1928, there were ten members and twenty children at Lyda Maple's home. The following month Nora Flickinger hosted a meeting attended by fourteen members and nineteen children. Indeed, one wonders how much visiting, and how much quilting could have been done with so many children about.

Those club meetings must have been loud and bustling with all of the children present. The cave-like area under the quilting frames was

often a favorite spot for the children to gather. Often one or two older children were recruited to baby-sit. Babies were tucked away in a cardboard box or an empty drawer to nap. If the weather was fair they could all be sent outside to play, and with all of the children gathered, club day must have been a treat for them as well as their mothers.[26]

Friendship Quilts

Naturally, with all of the quilting taking place at club meetings, friendship quilts were very popular. Album and friendship quilts were made by groups who signed the quilt blocks which were then stitched into a quilt that was kept by the maker or presented as a gift.[27] Four friendship quilts stitched in the early years of the club still exist. Betty Casson treasures the blue friendship quilt made for her mother-in-law, Ida. Marie Nichols's friendship quilt is now owned by her son Bill. Helen Thomas's quilt is now cared for by her daughter Marilyn Johnson. And Fannie's 1929 peach and white friendship quilt can still be found on the bed in the upstairs bedroom of her Mitchell, Nebraska, house, now owned by her granddaughter Arlene Elliott Buffington (see figure 9).

Fannie's friendship quilt contains seventy blocks. Thirty-five of the blocks are a solid peach fabric, quilted with a large round flower-like design. The other thirty-five blocks are embroidered with images of butterflies, flowers, and baskets. Twenty-three blocks have names or initials of the Busy Bee quilters, and a centered block features the year, 1929, encircled with flowers and vines. The other Busy Bee friendship quilts have a similar design with names, flowers, and butterflies embroidered on each block. But the background colors on those quilts are blue or pink, possibly according to the preference of the intended recipient of the quilt.

Friendship quilts continued to be popular with the Busy Bee quilters over the years. There is at least one record of a friendship quilt given to a nonmember. Mary Mae Holmes, the County Agent for the Mitchell area, often gave formal lessons at club meetings, and was very popular with the Busy Bee ladies. At the November 16, 1932,

Figure 9. Friendship Quilt, 1929, 73" x 91". Quilt courtesy of Arlene Buffington. Photograph by J. Keith Schreiber. Fannie Schumacher's Friendship Quilt has thirty-five embroidered blocks that feature a variety of butterflies, baskets, and flowers. One block near the center bears the date 1929 encircled by a simple wreath of flowers.

meeting, Fannie proposed that each club member piece a block, and contribute thirty-five cents, to make a friendship quilt for Miss Holmes. Fannie's motion was voted on and carried. The Busy Bees stitched the quilt for Miss Holmes, and presented it to her at the March 1 meeting.

Friendship quilts have always been popular with quiltmakers, whether or not the contributors belonged to a common club or organization. Friendship or album quilts became fashionable in the 1840s, and their initial popularity may have been related to the autograph albums that came into vogue in the 1820s. The development of permanent inks that could be safely laundered allowed quiltmakers to letter their quilts with verses, drawings, and signatures.[28]

For pioneer women leaving for the West during the great westward migrations of the 1800s, a friendship quilt could hold the names of friends and family left behind in the eastern states. Some of those friendship quilts have fascinating documented histories related to the circumstances of their making, the partings, and also of their long travels across vast distances by wagon, railroad, or ship. In the 1800s, the height of popularity of the friendship quilt also coincided with the middle decades of the 1840s and 1850s, a time when there was the greatest westward migration on the California and Oregon overland trails.[29] Stories collected by quilt historians in the state quilt projects document these travels, as well as the "ceremonial leave-takings," or quilting bees held before a westward departure.[30]

In 1848 Harriet Jane Pope Randolph traveled from New Jersey to her new home in Wisconsin. A treasured farewell gift that Harriet carried with her was a Medallion Star friendship quilt containing messages penned by family and friends. One block contained the poignant words, "When this you see remember me."[31] Leonora Bagley stitched an Album Patch quilt in 1854 for her sister Ellen who was leaving their home in Vermont to travel with her new husband to their homestead in the West. So that her sister would have tangible reminders of the loved ones left behind, Leonora's quilt contained sixty-four blocks inscribed with names of family, friends, and neighbors. Several of the blocks contained the names of deceased family members. Life in the Wisconsin woods was hard, and Ellen endured

declining health, isolation, and lonely days in her one room cabin built on a dirt floor. When she died four years later, at the age of twenty-two, her wedding/friendship quilt was sent back to Vermont to her sister Leonora.[32]

In the 1860s, Mary Elizabeth Simpson carried her Friendship Star quilt on her ocean trip from Maine, around the Horn, and then on to California to visit her brothers in Stockton. The centers of each star block were dated 1860–1861, and contained signatures of family members back in New England.[33] Sixty years later members of the Help One Another Club in Rocky Branch, Arkansas, created a friendship quilt for Elsie Allred Bland, a founding member of the neighborhood women's club. Today the town is covered by the waters of Beaver Lake, but the 1924 friendship quilt is a tangible reminder of the little town and of the friendship of the thirty-five women who stitched their names and appliqued bright designs on Elsie's quilt.[34]

In the twentieth century, friendship quilts were a popular and visible reminder of the bonds of community. Newspapers and periodicals printed patterns for making the quilts—from old and new patterns, and women in church and social groups embroidered their names on blocks to be sewn into friendship quilts.[35] Many of these quilts were stitched from the colorful sacking fabrics that held flour and sugar. The frugal depression-era housewives had to make do with any resources that came their way.

The Busy Bee Club members documented their long friendships, their gatherings, and their community in the simple friendship quilts they stitched for each other. These quilts are a lasting remembrance of the support and fellowship shared by the hardworking farm women. To the families that now own these vintage quilts, they are treasured heirlooms commemorating the hard times—the endurance and survival—of their prairie mothers and grandmothers.

In addition to the friendship quilts, the surviving Busy Bee Club record books offer a delightful glimpse into the lives of these early farm women, and of the humor and strength they mustered to greet each day. Through the Depression years, money was very tight. The members of the Busy Bee Club had the entire year to pay their dues of one dollar. It is recorded in the club by-laws that when a member's

dues became delinquent for one year, "she shall be dropped." There is, however, no record in the club minutes of a member being ousted from the club for nonpayment of the dues.

As with many clubs, filling the officers' positions sometimes became a problem for the Busy Bees. On at least one occasion members resorted to somewhat underhanded methods to fill their officers' slate. When Mrs. Williams resigned as secretary at the December 17, 1931, meeting, "Mrs. Scott, Mrs. Judd, Mrs. Hill and Mrs. Pickeral, all were nominated for sec. & all declined. As Mrs. Hattie Scott was absent we proceeded to elect her as sec."

The County Fair

The county fair was an important event for the rural families in western Nebraska. Farmers displayed their prize animals and produce, housewives entered their best dishes, garden products, and of course, their quilts. For the Busy Bee Club members, the fair offered an opportunity to show off their creative skills, and to hopefully win a cash prize to fund their activities for the following year.

Raising money for club activities was an annual event. Club funds were used to send flowers to sick club members or to their families. New babies were given a silver spoon, at a cost of one dollar. To raise money for these expenses, the Busy Bee members created original grain pictures that were displayed in an elaborately decorated booth at the fair.

Grain pictures, very popular from the late 1800s and into the early 1900s, were often incorporated into the displays submitted to the World's Fair exhibits. A state would create a grain picture using grains and produce grown in its area, such as corn cobs and cornsilk tassels from Iowa, Kentucky tobaccos, "juicy California fruits," and even wood products from Wisconsin and minerals of Colorado. A photograph book from the 1893 World's Fair shows an amazing picture of "Products of Illinois Prairies," a farm scene with a house, barn, windmill, animals, and fenced fields made entirely of corn and other midwest grains.[36]

Throughout the summer, the Busy Bee ladies gathered bundles

of wheat, corncobs and cornstalks, and other grains and seeds. This dried plant matter was then glued into a large design or mosaic. Through the 1920s, Fannie and Iona Campbell generally took charge of the club's fair booth and its decoration. These grain pictures were quite large. One year the women created a reproduction of the famous painting "The Reaper," that measured approximately four feet by eight feet. After the fair it hung in Iona Campbell's front room for many years. In other years the Busy Bee Club created the Liberty Bell and a Horn of Plenty, all made from local grains and dried stems and stalks.

In 1926 the subject of the grain picture submitted to the Scottsbluff County Fair by the Busy Bee Club was "old Fort Mitchell." Under Fannie's and Iona's direction the club members created the image, and then won first place for their work. The forty dollar prize gave them nearly enough funds for all of their activities for the coming year. The Busy Bees received the first place award for many years until another club to the north of Scottsbluff entered the competition. It was a hard blow to club finances, and to the ladies' pride, in the years when the Busy Bees only won second place for their fair entries.

Changing Times

Through the years, the minutes of the Busy Bee Club reflect the changing times. In 1932 when the Depression was upon the country, the club had a Hard Time Party. For part of the entertainment the members showed their quilt tops. In January 1935 the ladies voted to make a quilt to give to someone in need. Each member was to piece a block for the quilt, afterward "knotting" the quilt and "giving it to charity."

The minutes show that when all of the blocks for this quilt were completed, members decided to set them together with strips. They commissioned Lyda Maple to purchase nine yards of material, cotton, and thread to finish the quilt. In March of that year she submitted a bill for $2.15 for the quilt supplies.

The following January, in a meeting at Fannie's house, members made another quilt for charity and turned it over to Mrs. Perry to give

to a needy family. The Busy Bee members made every effort to help those in their community who were less fortunate. They tried to give $5.00 to charity every December, but in 1936, the club did not have even that modest amount in their bank. With hard times continuing, dues were dropped to fifty cents a year in 1938.

As the club grew in size through the 1930s, it became more difficult to accommodate the growing membership. In 1936 the Busy Bees voted to purchase folding chairs that could be taken to meetings at member's homes. Other clubs purchased stacking trays for members to use during the luncheon. One quilting club in western Kansas bought a box of china plates, cups, and saucers that traveled around

Figure 10. Busy Bee Club picnic, 1944. The Busy Bee Club members donned heels, hats, and dresses for this outdoor gathering. Perhaps it was a special event because their picnic lunch was served with a crystal punchbowl, flowers, and a lace tablecloth on the club's picnic table. Photograph courtesy of Arlene Buffington.

to each club member's home because, through the Depression years, no one owned enough dishes to serve the whole club.[37]

The Busy Bees enjoyed picnic suppers in the summertime. One of their charitable purchases was a four-foot long picnic table that the club placed on Albert Nix Drive (see figure 10). Velma Applebee recalled that there were a lot of trees along that road, and that the shady spot could be enjoyed by passersby, as well as by club members at their summer gatherings. Velma moved to the area after the Depression, and she always felt very special to have been invited to join the Busy Bees. She recalled many "carry in dinners" and picnics with the club. And as an example of the high regard in which she held her fellow Busy Bee Club members, Velma also noted that "there was no gossip among this group."[38]

In 1936, the club members voted to join the Federated Women's Clubs. As a result, their meetings became more formal with planned lessons and more programs. The Busy Bees began to do less quilting at their bimonthly meetings. As the 1930s drew to a close, omens of war appeared in the news. The roll call at one Busy Bee meeting was "What I can do to prevent war."

Minutes of the meetings through the 1940s changed in tone because of the emotional and financial stresses of wartime. At the May 7, 1941, meeting, the Busy Bee members voted to "do more sewing for the Red Cross." That summer they sewed diapers for the Red Cross, and in early December the club passed out fabric for Red Cross shirts. At the meeting two weeks later, members turned in thirty-nine shirts, and in the following January, fifty-two shirts filled the first bundle given to the Red Cross.

The Busy Bees did additional sewing for the Red Cross throughout the war. In July 1942 the minutes recorded that Fannie organized a quilting bee with donated blocks to make a quilt to give to the Red Cross. That fall several quilting meetings were held at Fannie's home to finish that quilt and other tops donated by Busy Bee Club members to be given to the Red Cross. In later years the club stitched lap robes, fabric hospital shoes, and more shirts for the Red Cross.

The Busy Bee members also learned to cook meals that did not use meat or sugar because those items were rationed. They registered the club for the sugar allowance and were allotted five pounds of sugar

per month to be used for food for club dinners and gatherings. The club also held button drives for the Red Cross, and book drives for the USO.

Last Years

Fannie developed heart problems at the end of her life, but her granddaughters remember that there was always a quilt on the frame, and there were always neighbors dropping in to pass the time quilting with her. And even though she was not in the best of health, each summer she drove her low-slung Hudson Terraplane sedan over rough, precipitous mountain roads to the family cabin near Laramie Peak in eastern Wyoming. She took her grandchildren along with her and taught them to bait hooks and fish in the snow-fed trout streams.[39]

Fannie died in the fall of 1946. The following year, the Busy Bee Club voted to purchase a copy of the book, *Best Loved Poems of the American People,* in her name. They donated it to the Mitchell Public Library where it would be placed on the memorial shelf and dedicated to the memory of Fannie Schumacher.

The Busy Bees continued to meet in the years following Fannie's death (see figure 11). As the original members grew older and passed away, their daughters and other young women came into the organization. But changing times and increased demands on women snipped away at the core of the club. As more young women went to work, membership in the Busy Bee Club fell. Eventually, only the older members remained.

Della Williams Connel, daughter of Olive Chamberland, an original member of the Busy Bees, was the last president of the club for many years. When her mother was alive, Della and Olive did creative writings and inspirational openings for many of the club meetings. Now in her nineties, Della is the oldest surviving member of the Busy Bee Club.

The last gathering of the Busy Bee Club was held on October 10, 1988, in the West Nebraska Nursing Home in Mitchell, Nebraska. Even though the club had attracted some younger members over the

years, the remaining members were aging, they were in poor health, and several were now in nursing homes. Members decided to hold a final gathering of the club, and, sadly bowing to the inevitable, the Busy Bee Club formally disbanded after nearly seventy years of meetings, quiltings, and friendly gatherings. Ten members, ages seventy to ninety-one years, attended the last meeting. Fannie's granddaughter, Arlene Buffington, was the last secretary of the club. She was also a third-generation member of the Busy Bees.[40]

The Busy Bee Club had formed to provide support and companionship to the isolated Nebraska farm women. Over the years their unity formed a mutual support system and gave them a community voice that they would not have otherwise enjoyed. Fannie Schumacher, an organizing force for the club for the first decades of its existence, was endowed with a keen sense of community responsibility. She was a friend and benefactress to her neighbors. And as a quiltmaker, meeting with the Busy Bee Club members afforded her the opportunity to

Figure 11. Busy Bee Club, 1959. Club members gathered for a photo in 1959, with members' children standing on a table at the back. Photograph courtesy of Arlene Buffington.

spend companionable hours with her friends, stitching quilts and visiting.

With the modest extent of their fundraising and charitable efforts, the Busy Bees supported local institutions and gave to the needy. When there was no cash on hand for donations, they used their needles to sew quilts and linens for neighbors who were "burned out," for young women and families just starting out, and, even though it stretched their resources, they also just made quilts "for charity."

The Busy Bee Club held a significant place in the lives of these Mitchell, Nebraska, farm women, and quilting provided the link that stitched their lives together. For nearly seven decades, through the hard times of the Depression, and the years of World War II, the stitching of the women of the Busy Bee Club threaded their lives and families into a solid and memorable community.

In many respects, the Busy Bees were typical of the hundreds of rural women's clubs that existed in the early decades of the twentieth century. The existence of nearly seventy years of club records and minutes provides a rare glimpse into the lives of these delightful ladies: their yearning for education and personal growth, their caring for their neighbors and community, and the weekly business of the club.

A perusal of the records also reveals the response of humble, ordinary people to national events. Members learned to survive with little money during the Depression, they contributed to the war effort in the 1940s, and they again learned to get by when food and other necessities were rationed during the war years. The Busy Bee journals depict the heroic efforts and patriotism of everyday Americans in rural communities across the land.

Perhaps most endearing is the humor recorded in the club minutes, wry comments that the club members did not cook, or clean, or garden. An entry about electing an absent member to a vacant office points out an ageless dilemma of the search to fill positions even in modern times in our social and charitable organizations.

The Busy Bees were unique, and yet they were also representative of quilting groups. Today's quilters make quilts for local families who have troubles, they send quilts overseas to war refugees and under-

privileged countries, just as the Busy Bees did. And perhaps the most universally common attribute is that when quilters gather, they do quilt, "what time they [don't] talk."[41]

In 1968, Busy Bee Club member Ida Casson wrote the following words that sum up the feelings of the ladies for their club, and for the dear friends they gathered with every other Wednesday morning for seven decades:

> The winters are cold
> The summers real hot
> But to club we go
> Our troubles forgot
> Our friends are true
> as you can see
> I'm so thankful I
> am a Busy Bee.

Notes and References

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6. Pat Ferrero, Elaine Hedges, and Julie Silber, *Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women and Quilts on American Society* (San Francisco, CA: The Quilt Digest Press, 1987), 97.

7. Eleanor Arnold, editor and project director, *Voices of American Homemakers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 5.

8. Ibid.

9. Unpublished family memoirs written by Arlene Buffington.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Buffington, interview with author, 15 August 1994.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Buffington, undated.

17. Buffington, 1994.

18. Arnold, 158.

19. Eleanor Arnold, ed. "Going to Club," from *Hoosier Homemakers Through the Years*, an oral history project of the Indiana Extension Homemakers Association (Rushville, IN, no date given), 115.

20. Jean Gausman, correspondence with author, 2 July 1996. The names of women's clubs have fascinated me since I learned of my grandmother's club attendance. For more than fifty years of her life, Leah Braithwaite Alder went every month to Literary Club and to Hopeless Club. The literary group read books and gave book reports. Hopeless was a monthly social gathering.

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23. Gausman.

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25. Ibid., 3.

26. *Going to Club*, 36–39.

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28. Ibid.

29. Ferrero, 52.

30. Ibid.

31. Jean Ray Laury, *Ho for California: Pioneer Women and Their Quilts* (New York, NY: E. P. Dutton, 1990), 28–29.

32. Linda Otto Lipsett, *Remember Me: Women and Their Friendship Quilts* (San Francisco, CA: The Quilt Digest Press, 1985), 73–83.

33. Laury, 48–49.

34. Kathlyn E. Sullivan, *Gatherings: America's Quilt Heritage* (Paducah, KY: American Quilter's Society, 1995), 106–07.

35. Brackman, 32–33.

36. *The Columbian Gallery: A Portfolio of Photographs from the World's Fair* (The Werner Company, 1894).

37. Information from an unidentified volunteer at a visitor center in Sharon Springs, Kansas, July 1991.

38. Undated club memoirs by Velma Applebee. Courtesy of Arlene Buffington.

39. Buffington memoirs.

40. The women who attended the last meeting of the Busy Bee Club were: Mary Bowen, Dorothy Blinton, Arlene Elliott Buffington, Della Williams Connel, Retta Foreman Elliott, Mary Scott Fanning, Nora Flickinger, Sarah Johnson (nonmember), Bessie Beebe Peck, and Helen Thomas.

41. Club records, 21 November 1928.