

# Uncoverings

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## Midwestern Pattern Sources

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During the twentieth century the printed media - books and periodicals - has had a profound effect upon our lives and culture. Quiltmaking is no exception. From the turn of the century the printed media has definitely affected the way quilts look.

In nearly any quilt display one comes across examples of 19th century quilts which appear to be one of a kind, with no printed source. These 19th century quilts are unique — either designs original to the maker or patterns passed on in families and communities in the folk tradition. But not so with 20th century quilts. Time and time again we find quilts made after 1900 which seem unique, but a little research points out that there is a published source for the design. An Art Deco fan from Holstein's *THE PIECED QUILT* seems to be a novel pattern, but a short search finds that it is one of the patterns syndicated by The Old Chelsea Station Needlecraft Company published in the 30's when this quilt was made. It is only the color arrangement of Holstein's example which makes it unusual. Again, a recent copy of *THE QUILT ENGAGEMENT CALENDAR* by Cyril Nelson featured a pattern about which he says, "the maker of this quilt translated her patriotism into a very effective design." A search turns up the fact that the maker translated a *FARM JOURNAL* pattern called Red, White and Blue from 1945 into her quilt.

I have had many similar experiences in which what looks to be a unique 20th century quilt turns out to be made from a published commercial pattern. I am now very skeptical when anyone tells me they have a one of a kind or original 20th century quilt. With a little digging I,

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or another pattern collector, can come up with a printed source. Of course recent trends in quilting are producing many original 20th century quilts designed by quiltmaker/artists, so the time I am talking about is primarily 1920-1970. My experiences with these mid 20th century quilts have made me realize how pervasive the influence of the commercial sources have been.

I'd like to discuss two of these commercial sources as representatives of the development of media sources in pattern history. Both are midwestern; in fact, both are within 50 miles of my home in Kansas. The stories of *CAPPER'S WEEKLY* and Aunt Martha's Studios are typical of the midwestern pattern sources in the mid-twentieth century and typical of the effect they have had on pattern history and quilt design.

Being an incorrigible categorizer, I have decided there are two kinds of quilt patterns. Original patterns are those designed by a person who is identifiable, if not by name by some identity. These patterns are designed by talented amateur quiltmakers or salaried designers. The other type of pattern is the folk pattern. Of course a folk pattern had to have been designed by someone at some time, but the origins are lost; there is no identifiable designer. To go beyond the family or neighborhood in which it is passed on orally, the pattern must be "Found" and then published. Goose Tracks is a pattern which the Ladies' Art Company found and published in their catalog around the turn of the century. It is popular still, a pattern which was found and remained found.

Some patterns are passed on in folklore, found and published, and then lost again. I feel the work of serious pattern collectors is "refinding" patterns. Many of the folk patterns were originally found by writers or by reader contributors to small regional farm newspapers with small circulations — *CAPPER'S WEEKLY* is a good example. The newspapers were read, the pattern ordered or copied, and a few quilts made. But then the newspaper was thrown away, the name of the pattern forgotten as it was handed down in quilt form and the pattern was lost again. It is up to us to find them a second time.

*CAPPER'S WEEKLY* is typical in many ways of the farm periodical sources. It is atypical in that it is still in business, publishing bi-weekly from Topeka, Kansas. Not much else has changed; there are no computer word processors to flash type on a green screen; the employees still read page proofs as they have for many years. *CAPPER'S* is now written for the small town family; it is a digest of news with a human interest slant — an optimistic good news type of paper with a circulation of 1 and 1/2 million. Although *CAPPER'S* has a 101

year history, I have concentrated on the mid-twentieth century during the second quilt revival, to use Cuesta Benberry's description.

The farm papers generally had one page for children and one or two pages for women, with the rest of the paper devoted to agricultural news and advice. CAPPER'S women's page was called "In the Heart of the Home." The editor was supposedly Kate Marchbanks, although this has always been a pen name. On February 12, 1927, an "Old Time Quilt Block" appeared with a note from Kate saying that "since old time pieced or patchwork quilts have again stepped in the limelight, the paper had received requests for quilt block ideas." Therefore, they would publish a few from an "old, old quilt book of a great-grandmother friend of ours."

The origin of the column is quite typical in that the editor was apparently responding to reader demand of the later 20 s. I had always attributed the revival of interest in quilt making during the 30's to the Depression when everyone needed an inexpensive hobby and inexpensive blankets, but reading the farm periodicals points out that the reader demand became so insistent around 1927 that most of the magazines began publishing patterns at that time, three years before the Depression. Of course farmers were never too prosperous during the 20 s, but the impetus for the revival of interest in quilts was not poverty but a general interest in Americana and antiques much as we are going through today in the third quilt revival. The interest during the late 20 s in colonial and American heritage is reflected in the fact that the Williamsburg, Virginia restoration project was funded in 1926. Period furniture was also quite popular at that time.

Responding to this interest CAPPER'S WEEKLY began printing a few quilt patterns taken from the "old, old book" which was apparently The Ladies' Art Company Catalog, a popular source. The editor of "The Heart of the Home" page was actually Louise Fowler Roote. She apparently researched the column, although whether she drew it is unknown. The drawings began with a rather stolid Ladies' Art Co. style, but the column quickly developed into an original and well-drawn quilt pattern feature. Roote mentioned that she had a trunk full of old quilts which were her initial inspiration after the old booklet. Over the next 8 years Roote's Kate Marchbanks quilt column produced a regular, weekly collection of patterns from several sources:

1. She copied earlier sources, such as the Ladies' Art Co. catalog. This was common in many columns, but CAPPER'S seems to have resorted to it only occasionally.
2. She documented old quilts from the Topeka area. After using the

patterns from the quilts in her trunk, she began documenting other antique patterns which had previously been unpublished. The column featured quilts from museums, fairs and quilt shows as well as from private collections. Roote was, in essence, finding folk patterns.

3. She documented contemporary quilts, printing fair winners and other original designs.
4. She also printed some original designs which either she or staff artists designed specifically to be sold as patterns.

The drawings of these patterns appeared in the newspaper and readers could send in 15¢ to receive an actual pattern. Unfortunately I have none of the full-size patterns, neither does CAPPER'S, nor Mrs. Roote.

At the same time patterns were appearing in CAPPER'S WEEKLY, the Capper Publishing Company was also publishing other magazines such as HOUSEHOLD JOURNAL and the KANSAS FARMER AND MAIL AND BREEZE. The identical patterns found in CAPPER'S WEEKLY were also offered for sale in these periodicals. A few catalogs were also printed which offered the newspaper patterns for sale. As far as I know, there were no pamphlets offering full size patterns in the early years of the column.

In 1935 Capper's quilt column began to fade out, replaced by a syndicated quilt column. Apparently Mrs. Roote found it easier to run syndicated mail order patterns than to continue writing a column on her own. By buying a syndicated column she no longer had to search for quilts, draw the illustrations, draft the patterns and sell them by mail order. The syndicated column did all that for her. Unfortunately, the coming of the syndicated column meant the end of the regional newspaper as a regional source for local folk patterns. No longer was a Topeka paper finding and printing Topeka patterns. The syndicated column homogenized quilt making across the country. While the syndicated columns such as 'Home Art', 'Old Chelsea Station' or 'Aunt Martha' developed a new and extensive body of patterns, it is unfortunate that they supplanted so many original, regional sources like CAPPER'S.

After 1935, CAPPER'S began carrying a large number of syndicated columns including 'Old Chelsea Station', 'Aunt Martha', 'Home Art' and 'Famous Features'. In the 1950's Roote, who was by this time editor of the entire paper, and Mabel Obenchain, a writer for 'Famous Features', compiled some of the old Capper's patterns into a pamphlet

called **KATE'S BLUE RIBBON QUILTS**. In the first printing of this booklet Roote wrote a foreword, but later editions eliminated the foreword and her credit. The booklet became **BLUE RIBBON QUILTS**. As Roote says today, "I am the forgotten woman."

Capper's has sold Famous Features syndicated booklets since the 1950's. **BLUE RIBBON QUILTS** was followed by 17 others, some of which contain **CAPPER'S** patterns from Louise Roote's 'Heart of the Home' column. Many of the pamphlets are still in print and available in a number of periodicals.

The story of **CAPPER'S WEEKLY** illustrates how the syndicated column replaced the regional column in the mid 30's. The 'Aunt Martha/Workbasket' syndicate is typical of many such organizations. Generally the syndicated column featured a small drawing of a quilt pattern supplied by the pattern house in a newspaper or magazine. The reader who was enticed by the drawing would send 10 or 15¢ to the address listed, generally something like Quilt Pattern Dept., in care of the newspaper. All mail addressed to that department was actually forwarded to the syndicated pattern company who then sent the reader her pattern by mail. The 'Aunt Martha' syndicate followed this method of operation. It is typical in other ways. It is still in business, and its patterns were generally original patterns designed by professional artists rather than folk patterns as the majority of the patterns which appeared in the regional periodical columns were.

While the syndicates did some folk pattern dissemination, they made a significant change in pattern sources by hiring designers to develop original patterns. Some of the designers are well-known; Ruby McKim and Anne Orr are two whose patterns were signed, and two who owned their own companies — no coincidence. Most of the designers were anonymous. The use of professional artists was a significant change because it took quilt patterns from the class of a folk art to a commercial art. Some people feel this is a decline in the art. Whether or not it was a change for the worse, it was definitely a change.

The history of Aunt Martha's Studios is as complex as that of any Eastern European country, with name changes and different wings of the company. I will try to summarize the relevant facts. In the early 30's Jack and Clara Tillotson of Kansas City began the Colonial Reditcut Quilt Block Co. as a response to the quilt revival at the time. They recently recalled for me that selling quilt kits was impractical because people could not afford them. The Tillotsons then switched to selling the patterns for the quilts for a dime. They shortened the name of the company to The Colonial Pattern Company.

The Tillotsons used the syndicated format to sell their patterns in the newspapers and magazines. The columns are usually under the name 'Aunt Martha'. That homey name derived from an incident in a Chicago newspaper in which the editor ran the column under the byline Martha Tillotson. (If you will recall, Mrs. Tillotson's name was Clara.) Mr. Tillotson guessed that the man chose the name Martha because it sounded colonial, Martha Washington being the best know Colonial dame. The Tillotsons were uncomfortable with the use of the family name and suggested the editor change the byline to Aunt Martha, which was both colonial and anonymous. Soon the name 'Aunt Martha' became better known than Colonial Pattern Company which was fortunate for pattern collectors since many other companies were also using the name Colonial at the time.

To add to our confusion the Tillotsons began another arm of the business when they added WORKBASKET magazine in the mid thirties. Aunt Martha's column generally consisted of a hodgepodge of patterns, a collection of needlework ideas. They began calling this collection The Workbasket and in 1935 began a formal magazine called AUNT MARTHA'S WORKBASKET. After a few issues the name was shortened to WORKBASKET and has continued until the present. WORKBASKET has always been primarily a source of other types of needlework pattern such as crochet and knitting patterns rather than exclusively quilt patterns. During the first few years at least one quilt pattern was included in every monthly issue and others were advertised as for sale from the Aunt Martha Studios. The full size patterns which appeared in WORKBASKET were also included in Aunt Martha's syndicated column. In fact at one point if one sent off for an 'Aunt Martha' pattern one received a WORKBASKET magazine. It seems hopeless to try to distinguish between WORKBASKET and 'Aunt Martha' patterns and collectors don't. Many of the patterns which are in the Aunt Martha pamphlets still in print were originally in WORKBASKET. Additional confusion occurs because these were not the only names used by the company. Later on the quilt patterns were sold through WORKBASKET under the name of 'Aunt Ellen' and I have seen one Aunt Martha column with a byline of 'Betsy Ross'. Furthermore, about 1940 the parent company became known as Modern Handcrafts.

If you are looking for quilt patterns in WORKBASKET, the best years are 1935-1940. During the war they appeared with less frequency as the quilt revival lost momentum. From 1945-1952 a few were printed and as far as I know none have been printed since 1952. The reasons for



this are two. One is the lack of interest in quilts in the late 40s and the other that the Tillotsons sold their pattern arm in 1949. Aunt Martha Studios/ Colonial Patterns were sold to Mr. & Mrs. Clifford Swenson with the rights to all the quilt patterns. WORKBASKET does not print quilt patterns to this day since they felt this would be unfair competition with Aunt Martha. Aunt Martha Studios were sold again in 1974 to Edward Price who still publishes the patterns in pamphlet form. After the Tillotsons sold Aunt Martha they continued to advertise Aunt Martha patterns in WORKBASKET until 1977 or so. The Tillotson family continues to publish WORKBASKET. John II and John III manage Modern Handcrafts Co. which publishes other magazines as well.

I asked the elder Tillotsons about the sources for the patterns which appeared under the Aunt Martha and WORKBASKET names. Mrs. Tillotson recalled that they originally printed older patterns after doing research in the library. Since there were very few sources for patterns in 1930 I assume she meant Finley, McKim and other writers who were finding folk patterns. Mrs. Tillotson also mentioned that she went to fairs and exhibits looking for patterns. This is the source for a 1933 pamphlet called THE QUILT FAIR COMES TO YOU in which patterns from quilts shown at the Chicago World's Fair and others were advertised. This booklet seems to be the first publication of the pattern we now call Cathedral Window. Here it was called The Daisy Quilt. Initially Aunt Martha Studios did some finding of folk patterns.

Aunt Martha also obtained patterns by holding quilt block contests. One booklet called PRIZE WINNING DESIGNS featured unusual blocks from women throughout the midwest. These early pamphlets are now out of print. They were a documentation of old and contemporary folk patterns. Shortly Aunt Martha Studios began hiring professional designers to draw up Aunt Martha originals. I talked to Marguerite Weaver who went to work for WORKBASKET around 1936. She had been a student of Eveline Foland's — a name familiar to collectors of KANSAS CITY STAR patterns. Mrs. Weaver says she designed many types of needlework patterns but her specialty was stamped embroidery patterns, many of which are still for sale by Aunt Martha and WORKBASKET. She did do many quilt patterns also, and she recalled that the designs were original with her. The philosophy behind designing original patterns rather than collecting folk patterns seems to have been that since they were selling these patterns they were concerned about copyright problems. So few people at the time gave a thought to copyright or plagiarism that Aunt Martha is to be



commended. Mrs. Weaver says that she and the other artists were quite careful to use only original designs. If she was inspired by a quilt she had seen she made changes in the design to make it original.

Aunt Martha Studios over the years has published a number of pamphlets. Cuesta Benberry gave me a bibliography of 14 booklets. Originally these were catalogs from which one could order a single pattern although they included a few full-sized patterns. In the 40 s they began the series which is still for sale. They are self contained with 11-17 full size patterns in each of the 8 or 9 still in print.

I chose to look at these two pattern companies for several reasons. I wanted to see where patterns come from. I wanted to explore the influence of the midwest in quilt design. And I wanted to find some lost patterns. I was surprised to find how much I could find about CAPPER'S WEEKLY and Aunt Martha. I found complete bound sets of CAPPER'S and WORKBASKET. I found all the artists and editors alive and most willing, in fact, eager to talk.

I want to close with the suggestion that you as people who are interested in quilt history might take on a similar project, refinding lost patterns, either alone or as a guild. Find a regional periodical which published near you. Search out the bound or microfilmed copies of old pattern columns. Talk to the people who documented local patterns. You might want to as a guild project reprint or redraw these columns. Of course copyright is a consideration but not an obstacle. The East Bay Heritage Quilter's Guild took on an similar project and did a real service by reprinting Alice Beyers' 1934 QUILTING book. If you are interested in such a project and don't know of a nearby source write and ask me. I'll be glad to give you some suggestions.

It is time we found all these lost patterns and did something about keeping them found.

**A Capper's/Famous Features Bibliography****A. Pamphlets from Capper's Publishing**

Whittemore, Margaret and Florence Wells. QUILTING, A NEW, OLD ART. Capper Publication, Topeka, Kansas, no date, (1928, according to C.B.). This is a catalog of patterns which may be ordered from Capper's. They did not appear in the newspaper, and seem for the most part to be from the earlier sources.

HOUSEHOLD'S QUILT BLOCK SERVICE. No date, ca. 1930. Another shorter catalog.

**B. Pamphlets from Famous Features Syndicate**

\*#116 Blue Ribbon Quilts (originally Kate's Blue Ribbon Quilts) by Louise Fowler Roote and Mabel Obenchain.

#101 Flower Quilts

#102 Grandmother's Quilts (1959)

#103 All Year (1959)

#104 Crib Quilts

#105 Covered Wagon Quilts (1959)

#106 Bible Favorites

#107 ABC Quilts

#108 Centennial Quilts

#109 Early American Quilts

#110 Star Quilts

#111 Round the World

#112 One Piece Quilts

#118 Grandmother's Flower Quilts by Virginia Mann

Bicentennial Quilts by Obenchain and Lengel

\*#124 White House Quilts by Obenchain and Vera Lengel

\*#125 Rose Quilts by Obenchain and Dorothea Pursell

\*#126 All Time Quilt Favorites (1979) by Mabel Obenchain  
Quilts on Parade by Virginia Mann

\*are pamphlets which are still in print, containing full-size patterns, available from Famous Features Syndicate, Box 4958, Chicago, Illinois 60680. The patterns in these are, in the words of Ms. Obenchain, "original, others come under the heading public domain." Some of these patterns were originally in 'The Heart of the Home' column in CAPPER'S WEEKLY.

**An Aunt Martha/WORKBASKET Bibliography**

Barbara Brackman (with much help from Cuesta Benberry)

A New and Easy Way to Make a Quilt (ca. 1931)

Favorites Old and New (#5511) (ca. 1932)

Prize Winning Designs (#300) (ca. 1933)

The Quilt Fair Comes to You (#5514) (ca. 1933)

Star Designs (#9450) (ca. 1942)

\*Quilt Designs - Old Favorites and New (#3175)

\*Aunt Martha's Favorite Quilts (#3230)

\*Quilts - Modern and Colonial (#3333) (1955)

\*Easy Quilts (#3500) (1958)

\*Quilt Lover's Delight (#3540) (1960)

\*Quilts (#3614) (1963)

\*Bold and Beautiful Quilts (#3778)

\*Patchwork Simplicity (#3779)

\*Quilts - Heirlooms of Tomorrow (#3788)

\*are pamphlets with full size patterns which are currently available from Colonial Patterns, Inc. 1441 Atlantic, Kansas City, MO 64116.

Others are out of print.

WORKBASKET magazine has published continuously since October, 1935.