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Red Cross Quilts for the Great War

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Motivated by a sense of patriotism and invited by the media to participate in an event known as the Great War, women were inspired to join and raise money for the American Red Cross in the years between 1916 and 1920.

Our country had entered the war and many of our boys were being shipped to France to protect their homeland and serve their country. Others were drafted and sent by train to camps on the east coast to await orders. Magazines and newspapers kept those at home informed while creating a subtle atmosphere of urgency about serving and doing one's share for the war effort.

LADIES HOME JOURNAL, HARPERS BAZAAR, WOMEN'S HOME COMPANION and COLLIERS magazines all carried regular feature articles plying the possibilities for women to help. No aspect of life was exempt from the urgings. After women sent their husbands to the draft they were invited to step into the industrial or business world (out of necessity in any case) or to go to school to prepare for a nursing career. Those over twenty-five (only after you were twenty-five could you get a passport to the war zone) could volunteer for canteen and aid stations in France. Or one belonged to the Red Cross at home and raised money to be spent in the war effort. Sentiment ran high for 'our boys over there' and, to quote a favorite passage of the day, everyone 'did their bit.'

By 1917 the American Red Cross already had a huge networking system in the United States and had just entered France, the seventh foreign commission in their organization. To give an idea of the magnitude of the Red Cross influence at the time, the Northwestern area (Washington, Oregon and Idaho) had 113 chapters with an average

membership of 7,396 per chapter. There were 532 nurses enrolled and 279,000 members in the Junior Red Cross in this area alone.¹

The Red Cross offered many the opportunity to serve. Newspapers and magazines spread the news of the Red Cross work. They published ideas for fund raising projects. Advertisers used pictures and caricatures of Red Cross nurses in their campaigns. Probably the largest organizational effort and influence other than the military systems, the Red Cross, in one way or another, indoctrinated thousands into its ranks at the time.

Encouraged that there was 'great work' for them to do, women developed a powerful spirit of service. Told there was not room for 'the parasite, the sluggard, the inefficient or the ignorant'², they responded by giving unselfishly. They were motivated to minister and assist through articles and advertisements in magazines and the circulation of posters picturing pathetic children in war torn countries or a soldier fighting 'huns.' They were influenced by theatrical productions raising money for the Red Cross by doing a play called "The Tragedy of Flanders," the art world creating propaganda posters and battle scenes, news media sending pictures of the war front into the mail box, and post cards manufactured to raise money for orphans or French revitalization. Stimulated by a music world that was singing 'Anchors Aweigh' and 'Over There' and had George M. Cohan doing patriotic musical productions, women answered the call to 'do their bit.'

MODERN PRISCILLA, LADIES HOME JOURNAL, WOMEN'S HOME COMPANION and HARPERS BAZAAR are said to have ultimately started the twentieth century's first quilt revival by urging women to "Make Quilts—save the blankets for our boys over there."³ However, this paper will be mainly concerned with those quilts made in response to efforts made to raise money for the Red Cross. These appear to be isolated efforts at quiltmaking.

The autograph quilt, a take-off on earlier friendship and album quilts, was designed to raise money by selling the privilege to 'sign' a block. These blocks then formed the quilt top which was usually auctioned or raffled. All of these monies then went to the Red Cross.

In a search to find autograph quilts made especially to raise money for the Red Cross, I found two in the American Red Cross

Museum in Washington, D.C. One was from Corvallis, Oregon with 42 red crosses appliqued on top and a blue border. It was presented to the Red Cross in 1922.⁴ The other is an autograph quilt made in Santa Monica, California by seventh and eighth grade children. The series of red crosses have autographs over all and contain the written signatures of more than 100 contemporary people such as President and Mrs. Wilson, Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, Helen Keller, Sarah Bernhardt, John Philip Sousa and George Cohan.⁵ There are also autograph quilts in the Albany Historical Society in Sabetha, Kansas and the Los Angeles County Museum collection.

Three Red Cross autograph quilts to be discussed here, are in the Latah County Historical Society collection in Moscow, Idaho. One quilt, maker unknown, reflects history of the Moscow area through embroidered names. Two of the quilts were made by Alma Lauder Keeling, who still resides in Moscow, and are referred to as the Oregon quilt and the French Orphan quilt.

The Moscow History quilt top (Figure 1) is covered with red crosses, machine appliqued onto a white ground. Ninety-five of these crosses in the center have embroidered names on them.⁶ The quilt is beautifully hand quilted.⁷ The donors of the quilt, Mr. and Mrs. Merrill Green, do not remember the quilt being made but believe it was done to raise money. It was part of the estate of Merrill Green's brother. The names are of people who had businesses or were in other occupations in the Moscow area during the Great War. Through interviews, old copies of local papers and the University of Idaho college annual I have identified a druggist, a realtor, several store owners and shopkeepers, clerks, a bank president and his cashier, meat packers and a butcher, laundry owners, a dress-maker, teachers, a postal clerk, a tailor, hotel owners, grain and poultry dealers and several farmers and housewives. Mrs. J.J. Day, whose name is embroidered in the center cross, was the wife of the owner of Day Mines in North Idaho, a mine still on the stock exchange.

The Oregon quilt is pieced of red and white crosses with blue borders surrounding them. Names of contributors are embroidered throughout and "Oregon 1918" is embroidered in the center cross. The quilt has a light batt and was quilted by Alma Lauder Keeling.⁸

Mrs Keeling made the quilt while living on her brother's home-

Fig. 3. French Orphan quilt. Latah County Historical Society. Maker: Alma Lauder Keeling. Inscribed "Orphelinat des Armees 1919."

"During the first World War there was a great deal of pressure on for people in the USA to 'adopt' (by long distance) the children orphaned by the War. I had a Sunday School class of Junior high girls in the Christian Church here at the time (Moscow), and we all wanted to help. The War was over, but the devastation was not, and many many children of French soldiers had been orphaned and made homeless by the holocaust.

While still in the trenches, the French soldiers who had a gift for drawing had made many designs depicting the tragedy of the War, and these were later made into postcards to be sold

to help support the war orphans. My class purchased the cards and we sold them to interested persons.

Then the idea of raising money by the quilt came to us, and the girls were enthusiastic! The first year our own little class 'adopted' one orphan at \$36.00, and when the quilt was finished in 1919 we had taken in enough money to adopt two!

When the Red Cross had its big auction sale of donated articles at Third and Main our quilt was donated to raise further money for the work of the Red Cross in the devastated area of the War.

My dad (Wylie A. Lauder) who had watched with interest the making of the quilt, decided he would bid it in for me, no matter how high it went. So he was there and did just that! I believe the quilt sold for \$32.00—just four dollars less than enough to support another war orphan. But this went to the Red Cross for the same work of rehabilitation, so my girls were happy. This was, of course, only the quilt top then, but mother had it lined and bound and took it to Los Angeles with us when we spent six months there. Few people had gone back to hand quilting then, so she had the work done by a shop there which specialized in machine quilting.

A word about the replicas of the trench drawing, which I enlarged.

No. 1 depicts two orphan children at their father's grave. (note his cap on the cross, and the mourners' arm bands on the children.)

No. 2 depicts a lost child in a bombed out town, crying for her family.

No. 3 depicts a mother and her children sitting among the debris of their home, not knowing where to go or what to do now.

No. 4 shows two orphans pulling the bell at the entrance of a war-orphanage, seeking admittance. Obviously both mother and father are gone and all they have left in the world is bound up in what they are carrying with them. Notice the tri-color flags over the door.

We could think of no better captions for the four pictures than Jesus' own words; "I was hungry and you gave me meat" "I was thirsty and you gave me drink" "I was naked and you

clothed me" "I was a stranger and you took me in". The lesson was clear to the girls: "Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these . . . You have done it unto me."

It was a very satisfying and worthwhile project for all of us.

A word about the embroidery on the quilt. It was all done in "outline stitch" with No. 50 Turkey red thread, except the white stars on the American Flag—which were done with single strand white embroidery floss.

The motto (*Orphelinat des Armes*) means in French, Orphans of the Army.

The gold stars are, of course in memory of our own American soldiers killed in the war.

The money paid by friends and/or relatives of the dead was as follows:

- (a) The two names in the center block netted \$5.00 each.
- (b) The gold stars on the four sides were \$2.50 each.
- (c) All other names were \$1.00 each.

The material for the quilt was all donated by the maker of the quilt, or her generous dad who had watched with interest the work being done—which took about three months."¹¹

Alma's letter more than anything gives us a feel for what was happening at the home front. Although the autograph quilt may have been made during a time when there was a push for making quilts to economize or "do your part," those I have mentioned seem to be single efforts rather than a movement. As Alma's letter indicates 'few people had gone back to hand quilting then, so she had the work done by a shop which specialized in machine quilting.' This occurred well after the war was over. The autograph quilts were being made by women (or children) answering a plea for help, often a newcomer to quilting who saw her work as a task to aid in the war effort rather than a revival of quiltmaking. The main impetus was the raising of money in aid of the Red Cross programs.

Notes and References:

1. The American Red Cross Annual Report, year ended June 30, 1919.
2. My own accumulation of adjectives gleaned from selected copies of LADIES HOME JOURNAL, 1917, 1918, and 1919 and WOMEN'S HOME COMPANION, 1917, 1918 and 1919.
3. Cuesta Benberry, "The 20th Century's First Quilt Revival," QUILTER'S NEWSLETTER, October 1979, Issue 116.
4. Quilt, Red Cross, 60.21, American Red Cross Museum.
5. Quilt, Red Cross, 22.23, American Red Cross Museum.
6. Quilt, 76.05.1, Latah County Historical Society.
7. Interview with Mr. and Mrs. Merrill Green, 9/13/1982.
Interview with Mrs. Catherine Short, 9/29/1982.
8. Quilt, Latah County Historical Society.
9. Letter written to Nancy Rowley by Alma Lauder Keeling 9/22/1982.
Interview with Alma Lauder Keeling 9/20/1982. With permission.
10. Quilt, 73.14.39, Latah County Historical Society.
11. Letter in quilt file, 73.14.39, Latah County Historical Society.
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