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Fifteen Dearborn Quilts

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The Dearborn, Michigan Historical Museum was established from two surviving buildings that were once part of a federal arsenal built in the 1830s. The Museum has acquired 120 quilts since the early 1950s, donated mainly by local citizens. Through a 1979-80 research grant from the American Association of University Women, the collection was recently studied, photographed and appraised.¹

The quilt collection covers a time span ranging from the early 1800s through the Bicentennial and shows the great variety of work that quiltmakers did as the nation grew. Fifteen representative examples were selected for this study to demonstrate the way in which historical events were reflected in the quilts women made. Each quilt is numbered and arranged in chronological order with a brief description and explanation of its history included.

After the Revolutionary War the Great Lakes region was the first virgin territory inland to be settled and became known at that time as the Northwest Territory. It was filled with dense forests and thousands of lakes. Indians camped along streams and traveled largely by canoe. In 1807 the Territorial Governor and Chiefs of the Ottawas, Chippewas, Potawatomis and Hurons signed a treaty ceding a large area of southeast Michigan to the United States. In 1825 the Territory began to boom when the Erie Canal was opened and immense numbers of people traveled by water, up the canal to Buffalo and then by steamer across Lake Erie to Detroit.

The oldest quilt in the collection reflects the beginnings of the Dearborn area.

Quilt #1—Star of Bethlehem pieced quilt, measuring 84" x 86", dates from the first quarter of the 19th century. It is all handmade of assorted cotton prints. Some of the prints, dating from the 18th century, have disintegrated.² A six-inch wide border encloses the large central star. The quilt backing is made from four 24-inch widths of brown cotton print material seamed together. Feather wreath designs are quilted into the four corners with diagonal lines spaced $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch apart used as background. Both light and dark quilting threads are used throughout. The quilt is finished with a narrow red and white printed cotton binding and is in excellent condition considering its age.

The elaborate quilt most likely was completed in New York state before 1830 when the style was popular.³ It was carried to Michigan by the pioneering Richard Haigh family when they traveled up the Erie Canal in the early 1850s, according to Florence Haigh Richard, great-granddaughter of the maker.⁴

In 1835 the first railroad in the Territory, named the Detroit and St. Joseph R.R., was built across the southern part of the state to the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. By 1836 as many as 2,000 people were arriving by ship in a single day. As they traveled on they found dense forests of splendid timber, flocks of wild turkeys and large herds of deer roaming the woods. Bears were plentiful but not considered dangerous except to livestock. Log cabins were quickly built and land was cleared making islands of civilization in the vast wilderness. Schools were established with fall, winter and spring terms. Young children attended all three terms but older boys, whose labor was needed on the farms, only attended winter terms.

Michigan became a state in 1837. When the 1850 Constitution was adopted women were given the right to use or dispose of their own property without the consent of their husbands. In spite of demands for equal educational opportunities university admittance for women was denied until 1870. It was widely believed at that time that intellectual pursuits would damage women's brains.

Two appliqued quilts dating from the second quarter of the 19th century demonstrate the custom of the time when well-brought-up young ladies, using their choicest material and their best needlework, made their bridal quilt as soon as they were engaged to be married.⁵

Quilt #2—Rose of Sharon appliqued quilt, measuring 82" x 82", c. 1840, is all handmade and has been preserved in excellent condition. Shades of pink, red, yellow and green calico prints are used to applique flower and leaf shapes onto a white cotton background. The quilt design is composed of four great square blocks of applique surrounded with a meandering vine border.⁶ The appliqued border flowers are attached with buttonhole stitches.

The quilt donor, Mrs. Arley (Esther) Meeker, preserved and cared for the quilt for sixty years. It descended from her husband's side of the family. Named Rynearson, the family worked for the railroad from its beginning and lived in Buchanan, Michigan near the eastern shore of Lake Michigan.⁷

Quilt #3—Rose of Sharon pieced and appliqued quilt, measuring 89" x 100", is dated between 1840–60. It is all handmade from calico prints then known as oiled calicos⁸ of red, pink, yellow and green appliqued to a white background. The original colors have faded, especially the green color which varies from pea green to blue-green. The basic pattern is a foundation rose pieced from yellow, red and pink calico and appliqued to a 13-inch white cotton square with green leaves and buds added. Thirty blocks complete the quilt center and are enclosed by a 12-inch wide border of pink and green buds and leaves. Pale blue and white thread is used for the fine quilting stitches made in a diamond pattern with lines spaced ½-inch apart over the quilt surface. The backing is made from three 30½-inch widths of coarse white cotton. The quilt is bound in red tape.⁹

Mrs. Davis, who appraised the entire quilt collection in April, 1980, stated that it was "an excellent bridal quilt."¹⁰

Another quilt, made in Tennessee and donated to the Dearborn Museum by a great-granddaughter, shows the quality and artistry of mid-century American quilting and gives a glimpse into the quiltmaker's life.

Quilt #4—Rolling Star pieced quilt, measuring 72" x 78½", was made in 1847.¹¹ It is all handmade of an assortment of cotton prints, now badly faded. The 36 eight-pointed star blocks are arranged in a checkerboard pattern and surrounded by a Wild Goose Chase border, also badly faded. A narrow brown and white striped binding finishes the quilt edges. The backing is made from four 23-inch widths of coarse white cotton. The quilting stitches are

very fine showing ten stitches to the inch and rows are spaced $\frac{5}{8}$ -inch apart. The quilt is in a worn out condition and only the stitches are holding it together.

The quiltmaker, Isabelle Simerly McKeehan, made the quilt when she was 54 years old.¹² She was born in the small village of Oak Grove, Tennessee in 1793. She married at age 27 and lived to be 102 years old. She was from a family of Irish farmers and all of her female descendents were considered fine quilters.

During the 1880s the former powder magazine of the Dearborn Federal Arsenal was converted to living quarters by Nathaniel and Elizabeth Ross. The home was used as a boarding house for many years and a cache of quilts was found when the house became a museum seventy years later. A Cross and Crown quilt was found among a fine assortment of patchwork quilts.

Quilt #5—Cross and Crown or Goose Tracks pieced quilt, measuring 70" x 78", c. 1850, is all handmade from red and white cotton fabric and shows no signs of wear. The solid red cotton color used in the patchwork and borders varies in color strength and most probably was home dyed.¹³ Wide lattice strips separate the thirty blocks and help turn the pattern into a bold design. The backing is made from flour and sugar sacks with a stamped design from BB & R Knight, Providence, R.I., still visible on one of the sacks. The quilt is finished off with a white binding (Figure 1).

When the Museum was begun in the early 1950s a rare and outstanding quilt was donated. Little is known about its origin.

Quilt #6—all-white Stuffed Quilt, measuring 82" x 90", c. 1850, is made of fine quality white cotton. Four pieces of material, varying in widths from 15 to 20 inches, are seamed together to make up the top piece. An elaborate center design features a shield and banner with the motto "E Pluribus Unum" lettered inside. Thirteen stars are arranged above the banner. A classical egg and dart border encloses the central design. Flower-filled cornucopias and lyres with elaborate scrolls are worked into the outside borders. All of these intricate motifs are stuffed from the back where many slits have been cut, stuffing inserted and then the fabric has been closed with tiny stitches. The entire surface is quilted every half inch in a diamond pattern giving an overall puckered appearance. Narrow twill tape is used to finish the edges. This rare quilt has been preserved in near perfect condition.

During the quilt appraisal¹⁴ Mrs. Davis suggested that the quilt may have come from the South because of its size and because a Southern lady would have had the time, money and skill to devote to such a project. She further commented that there was a strongly held belief by some Southerners before the Civil War that the Union should be preserved and that the quilt could very well be expressing that sentiment. A similar quilt, named a Secession Quilt, made in 1860 by Mrs. P.C. Cook of South Carolina, used some of the same ideas.¹⁵

As the Civil War approached there was much sentiment for the Union cause in Michigan, far removed from the South. Military units formed at the arsenal in 1859 when most of the area was still largely a wilderness.

Another historically significant quilt to the Dearborn area was given in 1957 by a great-granddaughter of a pioneering family.

Quilt #7—Autographed Album Quilt, measuring 66" x 81", is all handmade. Thirty blocks, each pieced from a different calico print, contain the names of friends, relatives and neighbors of the Morris Halsted family written in indelible ink. White lattice strips, measuring 3½ inches wide, frame and separate the blocks. The quilt is backed with three pieces of coarse white cotton material seamed together. It is finished with a narrow green binding. A quilted clam shell pattern appears in the blocks, flower and leaf patterns are used to quilt the lattice strips and a maple leaf pattern is quilted in the borders (Figure 2).

Morris Halsted of New York state built a log cabin in the area in 1837. He then returned to New York, married Delaney Vanostrand in 1839 and together they traveled to Michigan where they homesteaded. A son Chauncey was born in 1840. Records show¹⁶ that Chauncey enlisted in the Volunteers of Co. D, 6th Michigan Infantry, Heavy Artillery, during the Civil War and was home on leave in the spring of 1864 when the quilt was made.¹⁷ All who autographed the quilt were early settlers in the area. Chauncey's name appears in the top center row with friends' names grouped on either side. Close relatives' names are arranged in the second row with his grandparents' names inverted, the only signatures positioned that way on the quilt. Neighbors' and other friends' names are arranged in the remaining rows below. Perhaps the quilt was made for

Chauncey as an expression of friendship from those closest to him.¹⁸ He returned to duty and died in August, 1864 at Vicksburg.

After the Civil War the need for the Dearborn arsenal was gone and it was closed in 1872. As the frontier moved rapidly westward many veterans were encouraged to take up land in the prairie states. A popular quilt pattern of the day had evolved through many name changes. Originally called Job's Tears in colonial times, it was renamed Kansas Troubles or Rocky Road to Kansas after the Civil War.¹⁹

Quilt #8—Rocky Road to Kansas pieced and tied comforter, measuring 72½" x 79", c. 1870, is all handmade. Thirty blocks are pieced from a fine variety of multi-colored cotton material and set in lattice strips. The backing is seamed together from assorted sized pieces of cotton prints. A thick filler is held in place with tied yarns every few inches. A whisker guard is basted over the top edge of the quilt.

The comforter, found in the Ross House, has been attributed to Elizabeth Ross whose husband Nathaniel had a formidable beard. She must have resorted to sewing extra material along the top edge of her quilt to protect her fine handiwork from an oily and abrasive beard.

Quilt #9—Hexagon pieced quilt, measuring 75" x 77", c. 1880, is all hand pieced from tan and red cotton and unbleached muslin. The large sized hexagon pieces are arranged in a diagonally striped pattern. The borders, measuring 5 inches wide, are cut too short and are pieced out with extra material. They are machine stitched to the center patchwork. The unbleached muslin backing has machine stitched seams. A thin filler has been added and is quilted in a scalloped pattern. Quilting stitches are uneven, with many large sized stitches showing and visible thread endings. Spacing between quilting lines is irregular. The binding is machine stitched. The quilt, found in the Ross House, is clearly the work of a beginner²⁰ and has been attributed to Elizabeth Ross's daughter, Ellen Ramsey Ross, who died of tuberculosis at age fifteen.²¹

During the last quarter of the 19th century the growth of the needlework industry afforded women the opportunity to become even more creative in an art form that was uniquely their own. A wide variety of art needlework was made at that time to demonstrate

Fig. 1. Detail, *Cross and Crown* pieced quilt, 70" x 78". #RB-12, Courtesy the Dearborn Historical Commission.

the quiltmaker's skill.

Quilt #10—*Flower Basket* appliqued and stuffed quilt, measuring 63" x 79", c. 1880, is made of silk and wool fabrics in shades of red, orange and green. A flower-filled basket is appliqued to a dark, neutral background, with white touches adding accent to the unique design. Some of the flowers are stuffed. Other flowers and leaves are arranged around the central basket. The backing is seamed by machine. Fine hand quilting is made in a diamond pattern. The quilt is bound in narrow red wool applied by machine.

The quiltmaker, Sarah Gardner, lived in the Dearborn area and nursed her ailing mother until her death in 1880. Sarah married William Leslie in 1882 when she was 32 years old and he was 50 years old. In an old photograph Sarah is shown standing beside her seated husband wearing her dark green silk wedding dress, purchased by selling the family cow according to Mahala Brown, the quiltmaker's daughter.²² Some of her applique needlework embellishes the bodice and sleeves of the dress, which is in the museum's costume collection.

Fig. 2. Detail, Autographed pieced quilt, 66" x 81". #57-86.2, Courtesy the Dearborn Historical Commission.

Basket quilts were made all through the 19th century, although there was a sharp decline in all quilting activities by the end of the century.²³

Quilt #11—Basket pieced quilt, measuring 73" x 78½", c. 1890, is made of blue, brown and white cotton prints and is pieced by machine. Blue lattice strips surround each of the eighteen basket blocks which are set on point. The white cotton backing is made from three widths of material with machine stitched seams. Fine handstitches are used in the quilting design of leaves and flowers. A white binding is used to finish the quilt edges.

The quiltmaker, Mary Belle Sherer Haight, was born in 1872 in Branch County, southwest of Dearborn near the Indiana border. Her German ancestors first came to America in 1810. She made many quilts during her lifetime and quilted until only a few years before her death in 1957 according to her son Floyd Haight.²⁴

Fig. 3. Quilmakers of the Ladies' Aid Society, First Methodist Church, Dearborn, 1890. Courtesy the Dearborn Historical Commission.

Crazy quilts gained wide popularity during the 1870s, 80s and 90s and flourished until about 1910. Almost every home had one displayed in the parlor. As new materials were developed and existing supplies became cheaper and more widely available, more and more women learned to use their needlework skills to express their individuality in original designs, combinations of styles and pattern variations.²⁵

Three examples from the Museum's collection of twenty Crazy quilts have been selected and studied because the most information was available about the quilts and the quiltmakers.

Quilt #12—Crazy Parlor Throw, measuring 63" x 76", dated 1891, is composed of thirty blocks made from fine quality velvets, silks and unusual fabrics and embellished with a variety of embroidery stitches. One of the center blocks is signed by Mrs. J.S. Walker, president of the Ladies' Aid Society of the First Methodist Church of Dearborn. The quilt was made for her, according to her granddaughter who was one of the donors.²⁶

In an 1890 photograph taken at the church, members of the

embellished with elaborate embroidery stitches. Some of the embroidery designs include flowers, animals, insects, monograms, canoes and fans which appear in two corners. The quilt is backed with maroon sateen and bound with maroon wool tape (Figure 4).

The quiltmaker, Hattie Purdy, was born in the Dearborn area in 1862 and spent all of her 93 years there according to her son Charles Purdy.²⁸ Her quilt is a gay and happy memento of her life and its many activities when she was about 30 years old.

Quilt #14—Crazy buffalo robe, measuring 66" x 70", c. 1900, is made from woolen scrap pieces. Soft shades of red, orchid, green, gray, brown, black and white are combined in irregular patches with the initials F.H. designed in the center of the robe. A heavy ribbed and flowered material in shades of red and tan is used as a backing. Feather stitching is used to embellish the surface and the two layers are tied together.

During the first decade of the 20th century woolen material and buffalo robes were manufactured at the Arna Mill in Dearborn. Buffalo robes were used for autos, carriages and other transportation opened to the elements that required warm covers for passengers' comfort. The Arna Mill employed many local people, and was destroyed in a spectacular fire in 1910.²⁹

By the beginning of the 20th century women no longer spent hours piecing quilt tops or devoted long hours bent over a quilt frame. They purchased and used manufactured goods with enthusiasm and pride. More and more women began to work outside the home. Most of them were young and single or widowed or divorced. Another quilt example was made by a woman from such circumstances.

Quilt #15—Dresden Plate appliqued and pieced quilt, measuring 83" x 98", is dated from the first quarter of the 20th century. Hand pieced multi-colored cotton prints form the "plates." These are appliqued by machine to a white foundation block. Yellow lattice strips separate the blocks. A 10-inch wide yellow and white, wedge-shaped border encloses the center blocks. Two large yellow pieces of cotton seamed together form the quilt backing. Yellow bias tape is used to finish the scalloped quilt edges. The intricate quilting is done by machine using matching thread, i.e., white on top and yellow on

the quilt back. It is a really fine example of machine quilting with no visible thread tails.

The quiltmaker, Amanda Dietrick, was born in Wisconsin in 1869. She was an accomplished seamstress and taught art and weaving to Indian children in Steward, Nevada from 1915 to 1935 in the Indian Field Service. After her retirement she made her home in Dearborn with her sister, Mary Dietrick Haight, and brother-in-law, Floyd L. Haight, until her death in 1947.³⁰

All through the 19th and 20th centuries quiltmaking reflected the changes that were taking place as the nation grew. New quilt-making ideas and names were swiftly spread by the westward movement of the population. Rapid industrialization, including the introduction of the sewing machine, lightened the work load and changed women's roles as many joined the work force. The art and skill of quiltmaking continued, producing new ideas, originality and experimentation in needlework.

Appendix—Quilts from the collection of the Dearborn Historical Museum, Dearborn, Michigan

- Quilt #1—Star of Bethlehem pieced quilt—56-33.11
- Quilt #2—Rose of Sharon appliqued quilt—80-2.2
- Quilt #3—Rose of Sharon pieced and appliqued quilt—70-84.9
- Quilt #4—Rolling Star pieced quilt—72-77
- Quilt #5—Cross and Crown or Goose Tracks pieced quilt—RB-12
- Quilt #6—All-white Stuffed Quilt—53-63.4
- Quilt #7—Autographed Album quilt—57-86.2
- Quilt #8—Rocky Road to Kansas pieced and tied comforter—RB-8
- Quilt #9—Hexagon pieced quilt—RB-9
- Quilt #10—Flower Basket appliqued and stuffed quilt—55-19.12
- Quilt #11—Basket pieced quilt—71-104.10
- Quilt #12—Crazy Parlor Throw—66-82
- Quilt #13—Crazy Quilt—55-70
- Quilt #14—Crazy buffalo robe—55-82
- Quilt #15—Dresden Plate appliqued and pieced quilt—71-104.12

Notes and References:

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