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Nineteenth Century Middle Class Quilts in Macon County, North Carolina

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One of the major tasks of present-day quilt historians is the examination of generally accepted assumptions about American quiltmaking traditions. Where I live, in the Southern Appalachian mountains, that study is complicated and obscured by widely believed and exaggerated romantic notions of mountain life generally. As with most stereotypes these are based on some truths, but the problem is that they obscure other truths which reflect the real variety of experience within mountain culture.

The stereotyped picture, in its extreme form, goes something like this: That the Southern mountains were settled by refugees and misfits from Tidewater culture; that these unfortunate folks took advantage of the mountainous terrain to escape authority in its various forms, so that they could make their moonshine, shoot their neighbors, and marry their cousins; that they avoided with suspicion any contact with the outside world, and consequently, had to grow or manufacture everything they needed to live, including all food, clothing and shelter; that as a result they were completely ignorant of events and products of the civilized world; that because of their isolation and remoteness, they preserved their backward self-sufficiency *unchanged* well into the twentieth century, and (to hear some people) if you go back into the hollers far enough, you can still find people untouched by the outside world, sitting in their log cabins, speaking pure Elizabethan English, singing ballads, and making baskets and quilts. We can laugh at this exaggeration, just as we laughed at the distorted view of mountain culture when we used to watch "The Beverly Hillbillies." Still, we have never examined the assumptions behind the comedy. We assumed that there was some truth there without question.

Two groups are partly responsible for purveying these distortions. The first group are the travellers and tourists who have flocked to the mountains in great numbers since the railroads arrived in the late 1800's. They saw what they had planned to see: spectacular natural beauty and people living as they imagined their pioneer forebears had lived. Because they were mostly urban dwellers, their first close look at rural America convinced them that they were travelling backward in time, visiting their "contemporary ancestors," and "yesterday's people."

The second group were Northern social workers who sought to improve the life of the mountaineers. Some did this by recruiting laborers for the growing number of cotton mills in and around the mountains. Others, who wanted to preserve the picturesque aspects of the area, taught mountaineers to weave coverlets, to make baskets and quilts, and to carve little wooden animals, all to sell to tourists. This is an oversimplified explanation of why we associate crafts with the Southern mountains.

Several years ago at the North Carolina Quilt Symposium, a midwestern quilter told me she would be driving back home through the mountains and could I please tell her where she could stop off to see mountain ladies quilting. She had just spent three days with hundreds of quilters from all over the country, but she assumed that mountain quilters would be different, somehow pure and unaffected, and that they would be on display, perhaps under glass.

These stereotypes prevent us from seeing the wide diversity that has always been a part of Appalachian life. The new field of Appalachian Studies has encouraged dozens of scholars to produce volumes examining the myths and realities of Southern mountain history and culture. For my part in this work I have chosen to study quilts made in one North Carolina mountain county prior to the crafts revival of the twentieth century, with particular emphasis on the changing range of fabrics available to quiltmakers. Fabric selection is possibly the single most important element influencing the way quilts look.

To take a fresh look at mountain quilts, we'll start with geography. The Appalachian range *is* mountains, including foothills, plateaus, and six thousand foot peaks. Where there are mountains there are also valleys carved out by creeks and rivers. Some valleys are narrow, carrying fast-moving currents, some are wide and fertile. Between the mountains are gaps, formed by wind and water, through which animals and, later, humans, made trails.

Fig. 1. Rose of Sharon, made by Aunt Matt Anderson, c. 1860. 85" x 85".

The Southern Appalachians are recognized by biologists and ecologists for the abundance and diversity of plant and animal life. The Cherokee Indians recognized the area as a good place to live when they came from the North and drove out the earlier inhabitants. The Cherokees established small villages and a system of agriculture that supplied their basic needs. A system of trails linked these villages to each other and to other tribes along the Atlantic coast, several hundred miles away, with whom the Cherokees traded for shells and for leaves of the Yaupon holly (Ilex vomitoria) which they used to prepare their Black Drink for ceremonial occasions.

These trails also brought the first European explorers beginning with DeSoto in the 1600's, followed by geographers, artists, botanists, and speculators, and especially trappers and traders. Early traders introduced the Cherokees to aspects of European civilization. Some, such as small pox, had devastating effects. Others were considerably more welcome. Imagine being a native American woman responsible for taking raw deerhides and other furs and skins and making clothing for a family. Imagine a moment of realization upon seeing for the first time brightly colored cloth carried or worn by a white trader, then to discover that the price of this wonderful, labor-saving stuff is to be paid with those

very pelts and hides they would replace. This represents a very major cultural innovation.

Lest we tend to view such exchanges as accidental, haphazard, or infrequent, we must note that by 1707, the trade between the Cherokees and other tribes and entrepreneurs operating out of Charleston, South Carolina, had reached such proportions and had become so lucrative that the colonial government of that colony formed a Board of Commissioners to regulate the trade and license the traders. In 1716 this Board formed an official commercial treaty with the Cherokee Nation. John Henry Logan, in his *History of the Upper Country of South Carolina,* recreates a trading scene from this period:

> The smoke from a hundred campfires curls above the thick tops of the trees and the woods resound with the neighing of horses, and the barking of hungry Indian dogs. A large supply of goods has arrived from Charleston, and every pack-saddle came down from the Nation loaded with skins and furs, and these being now displayed to the best advantage, the work of barter begins.
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> In the open air and in the trading-house are congregated a motley assembly of pack-horsemen, traders, hunters, squaws, children, soldiers, and stately Indian warriors—some silent and grave, seemingly uninterested in the scene; but the greater number loudly huxtering, and obstinately contending over their respective commodities in trade, in many barbarous tongues.
>
> The hunters from distant wilds want a supply of powder and ball, each squaw fancies some bright-colored fabric for a new petticoat or dress, while the warriors and old men eagerly demand guns, ammunition and blankets.
>
> The clamor begins, however, presently to subside, and at length the last bargain has been struck, and the goods and peltries have alike changed hands. The packs are once more made up; the goods for the Indian towns, and the skins for the market on the seaboard, and everything is again ready for the trail . . . The trains enter the narrow paths, and are soon far on their way, leaving the garrisons and agents of the posts to the dull monotony of the wilderness till their next visit.[1]

Not all of the treaties made between the colonial and state governments and the Cherokee Nation were commercial. In a series of treaties the Cherokees ceded large portions of their land, in the vain hope that incoming settlers could be satisfied and would leave them the rest.

Fig. 2. Cotton Boll, made by Elizabeth Sanders Morrison, c. 1864. 63½" x 80".

Usually the land they gave up was already occupied by illegal white settlers. In 1817-19, the Cherokees ceded to the State of North Carolina the section which includes present-day Macon County.

About this time Jacob Siler and William Brittain came into the area, bought an Indian cabin, and set up a store to carry on trade with the Indians and to supply the needs of earlier settlers and the growing swell of newcomers, now that settlement was legal. Siler and Brittain hauled their wares by wagon and horseback over the mountain trails, from lowland trading centers to the south and east. Their wares would have included many of the same items earlier traded to the Indians, including iron cooking pots, guns and ammunition, blankets, and fabrics.

The first settlers in Macon County claimed large tracts of fertile flat land along the Little Tennessee River and larger creeks. They selected the site of the old Cherokee town of Nikwasi for their own county seat of Franklin. Later arrivals took up the remaining available land on smaller creeks and in the steeper coves. Within a few years the larger landowners had established flourishing farms. They produced a wide variety of agricultural products and hauled their surplus grain, fruit, and livestock to market towns in the low country where they traded for a wider selection of goods than was available at local stores. Roads

were poor in the mountains during the nineteenth century, just as they were nearly everywhere in rural America at that time. Passage over the mountains was slow so travellers expected their market trips to take many days.

These well-to-do landowners formed a middle-class within the stratification of mountain society. Ronald Eller, in his book *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: The Modernization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930,* describes this group in this way:

> Usually the first to arrive on the land, such families had acquired large land holdings and by 1830 had emerged as a resident ruling class. More noticeable in the larger valleys and county seat towns, these wealthier families provided the political leadership in the mountains and often controlled local commercial enterprises. Their descendants, having access to resources and educational opportunities in the flatlands, became merchants, teachers, and lawyers.[2]

To illustrate this point, here is a portion of a letter written by Laura Siler, a Macon County girl, to her favorite cousin, in which she entertains him with an ironic description of her boarding school experience in Asheville, which is 70 miles from Franklin and would have represented a journey of at least two days over two major mountain ranges:

> September 29, 1847
> Dear Cousin Leon,
>
> Well as you are aware I am settled in for the present in the notable city of Asheville. A place *unsurpassed* in the known world for the *intelligence, refinement, correct taste, generosity* and *hospitality* of its inhabitants, qualities that could not but endear them to so warm hearted a creature as I, especially when with that extra warmth of heart is united a *mind* and *taste so fully capable* of *appreciating* the many excellencies enumerated. Hah![3]

The middle-class in Macon County formed a minority within the population, but its influence was felt by all. Even the residents of small farms higher in the coves would have been aware of this group as fashion settlers in architectural styles, clothing, and politics.

A middle-class household inventory in the mid-nineteenth century included looms and spinning wheels to produce home furnishings and everyday clothing for the family and any servants or slaves. Macon

Fig. 3 North Carolina Lily variation, made by Margaret Gillespie Slagle, c. 1880. 66½" x 75".

County farmers raised sheep, consequently wool was available for clothing and blankets at little cost.

As we are now beginning to realize, quilts were not as commonplace in early America as was once thought. Until the widespread availability of inexpensive manufactured fabric in the second half of the nineteenth century, there simply wasn't an abundance of desirable fabric scraps. Most quilts which remain from that period are well-planned with the same fabrics throughout. We used to assume that there must have been large numbers of utilitarian scrap quilts that supplied the bedding needs of most of the population and that these quilts were worn out long ago, leaving no trace. But upon close examination it appears that in Macon County, as elsewhere during the early nineteenth century, blankets were cheap and available and quilts were special creations. A woman planning to spend the time and effort to make a quilt was likely also to have gone to the expense to purchase fabric especially for that quilt.

The Siler family in Macon County, like most of their neighbors, had little access to cash money. They bartered and they maintained charge accounts with local storekeepers which were settled once or twice a year. A record of the Siler family account with T.C. Bryson's store for

1849 survives in the Siler Family papers in the Southern Historical Collection. This account shows us what was purchased during that year and the prices paid. Among other items are included the following:

10 yds linen	40 p yd
1 dz buttons	10 p dz
1½ yd swiss muslin	60 p yd
2 pr ladies hoes	40 p pr
1 pr bl kid gloves	1-00
1 card hooks & eyes	10
10 yds calico	15 p yd
6 yds domestic	15 p yd
1 peice wadding	5
1 tooth brush	15
1 cake almond soap	10 (4)

We know that the Silers were a well-to-do family. Laura Siler married a doctor who later was elected to the State Legislature. Not everyone in the mountains could afford to buy almond soap and black kid gloves, but these existed side by side with home-made lye soap and hand-knitted mittens. The availability of goods and the steady commerce in and out of the area affected everyone. Every family had to come into town from time to time and country people were aware of what merchandise was available even if they couldn't often afford it.

Some people have characterized the pre-Civil War and pre-industrial period in the mountains as a kind of golden age of comparative prosperity and well-being. The Civil War, the slow economic conditions and uncertain political situation afterward, followed by the exploitation of timber and minerals by outside interests and the advent of tourism in the late nineteenth century drastically altered the mountain region and its people. Traditional family life, agricultural patterns and the economic base were irrevocably changed. The problems which emerged during this period were not the result of the region being isolated from the outside world, but of the impact of modernization imposed by these outside interests. While there were places within the mountains that were at times comparatively inaccessible, there was never a period when mountain people were "cut off from the outside world." The trails and roads that brought people into the area didn't somehow close up behind them.

Having dealt with the myths of isolation and self-sufficiency, we now

Fig. 4. Star, made by Mary Morrison Bryson, c. 1880. 62" x 76½".

have a proper framework through which to view the quilts. I am indebted to Laura Nelle Estes of Franklin for locating these quilts and arranging interviews with their owners.

This Rose of Sharon quilt (Fig. 1) was made, according to family tradition, by Aunt Matt Anderson, about 1860. She worked as a live-in seamstress hired in the fall and winter to sew family clothing for Dr. and Mrs. A. C. Brabson and their eleven children. The Brabsons lived in the Riverside community south of Franklin in a large frame house which still stands. The fine work and precision reinforce the implication that this quilt was made by a professional seamstress. The seeming incongruity between the red and green fabrics in the blocks and the blue and tan tones in the border is attributable to fading of the cretonne prints of the latter. The batting in this quilt is wool, which is unusual for Southern quilts generally, but which may have been more available than cotton in the mountains.[5]

The Cotton Boll quilt (Fig. 2) was reportedly made by Elizabeth Sanders, who was born in 1833, married William Morrison, and died in 1864. The present owner is the quiltmaker's great-granddaughter and still has the Bible that Elizabeth Sanders received for her eleventh birthday. The applique design is similar to a quilt owned by the North

Fig. 5. Pine Burr, made by Harriet Love Anderson Stallcup, c. 1880. 69½" x 75½".

Carolina Museum of History. The four-corner arrangement is fairly uncommon, more often associated with very large applique motifs. The applique has been sewn on a machine, so it appears that there were sewing machines in the mountains at an early date.[6]

An unusual quilt (7) was reportedly made by Margaret Gillespie as a young girl before her marriage to Henry Slagle in 1888. She was the granddaughter of Jesse Siler, an early Macon County resident, and the mother of the present owner. This quilt is a variation of the North Carolina Lily. (Fig. 3) The stems were apparently green originally but have now faded to tan. The most striking feature is the red gathered and appliqued "dahlia" flowers. One has been removed, leading to speculation that someone at some point took it apart to see how it was made.

A Star quilt (Fig. 4) was reportedly made by Mary Morrison Bryson, who was born on May 10, 1841, and died on May 10, 1918. She married Samuel Byers Bryson, who died in 1895. They had ten children, one of whom, Robert T., was the father of the present owner. The maker of this quilt was related to the husband of the woman who made the Cotton Boll quilt. Four corner pieced arrangements are even less common than in applique. Perhaps Mary got the idea from her in-law.

The quilt contains an unusual combination of printed fabrics in red, white, pink, and blue prints, but as the fabrics are consistent throughout, this appears to have been intentional.[8]

A Pine Burr quilt (Fig. 5) was reportedly made by Harriet Love Anderson Stallcup, who lived in Tennessee, was widowed there, and moved to Macon County with her second husband just after the Civil War.[9] Harriet Stallcup was the great-grandmother of the present owner's husband. The fabrics in this quilt are typical of the late nineteenth century, although the blue, pink, and green combination is uncommon. By alterating two colors in the same block the maker has created an even more complex design than usual.

In conclusion, these quilts made by early Macon County residents and handed down within their families do not fit the stereotype of isolation and self-sufficiency usually associated with mountain culture and mountain crafts. Doubtless there were quilts made from remnants of homespun, home-woven fabrics, and scrap quilts from more homely fabrics, but it seems there were also, at the same time, women who selected and purchased fabric in order to make formal, planned quilts. It is possible that these special quilts were the rule rather than the exception. These quilts are in many ways similar to nineteenth century quilts made elsewhere in the country. Since these are truly "mountain quilts" we must now expand our definition of that term to include them.

Notes and References

1. John H. Logan, *A History of the Upper Country of South Carolina,* (Charleston: S.G. Courtenay, 1859; Columbia: P.B. Glass, 1859; Spartanburg: Reprint Co., 1960) pp. 251-252.
2. Ronald D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: The Modernization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930.* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1962) p. 11.
3. Ms. letter, Laura Siler, September 29, 1847, in the Lyle and Siler family Papers (#1818), Southern Historical Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
4. Ms. store account record, dated August 11, 1849, in the Lyle and Siler Family Papers (#1818), Southern Historical Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

5. Applique quilt, Rose of Sharon, made by Aunt Matt Anderson, Macon County, N.C., c. 1860. In collection of Betty Ann Bryant.
6. Applique quilt, Cotton Boll, made by Elizabeth Sanders Morrison, Macon County, N.C., c. 1864. In collection of Sue Waldroop.
7. Pieced and applique quilt, North Carolina Lily variation, made by Margaret Gillespie Slagle, Macon County, N.C., c. 1880. In collection of Harriet Slagle Setser.
8. Pieced quilt, Star, made by Mary Morrison Bryson, Macon County, N.C., c. 1880.
9. Pieced quilt, Pine Burr, made by Harriet Love Anderson Stallcup, Macon County, N.C., c. 1880.
10. I wish to thank the Smoky Mountain Quilters Guild, Franklin, North Carolina, and the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild, for their financial assistance toward the presentation of my paper.

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