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# Characteristics of Missouri-German Quilts

**Suellen Meyer**

The Missouri River winds eastward through the heart of Missouri cutting the state in half north and south. When the first American settlers from Kentucky arrived in the early 1800s, they chose the land north of the river which reminded them of home; Tennesseeans settled farther south in the Ozarks and the Bootheel of Missouri. The land bordering the river was settled sparsely by frontiers-people, those hardy ones who would stay for a few years, hack out a farm, and then move when anyone got too close. Thus, when the Germans arrived seeking their fortunes in the 1830s, the river land was waiting for them.

Many German-American descendants still live where their ancestors settled on the Missouri river, in villages and towns with names that reminded them of home: Rhineland, Dutzow, Berger, Holstein, Hermann. Most of the smaller towns are dying while the larger ones, like Hermann, are suffering from fast-food franchises and uncontrolled subdivisions. The German culture, though respected, is becoming a thing apart, celebrated in festivals, reminisced over, but no longer an everyday part of life.

Until World War I, the area was thoroughly German in culture. Everyone spoke German. School lessons and church services were conducted in German. When America entered the war, however, the Missouri-Germans chose to speak English to demonstrate their loyalty. Now, people in their seventies and eighties are fluent in German and English; their children may speak and understand German but not be able to read it; their grandchildren know only English.

For some years I had wondered about the quilts made by the Missouri-German women. How did the Germans learn to quilt?

How important were quilts to their lives? What did the quilts look like? In 1982, I had the chance to find the answers to my questions. Funded by a grant from the American Association of University Women, I visited with women in the small towns on the river from St. Charles to Jefferson City, photographed their quilts, and asked them about their lives. (Figure 1)

*Historical Background*

The great wave of German immigration lasted from the 1830s through the 1850s. Thousands came directly from western Germany and Switzerland to settle along the Missouri River valley. They left Germany to escape its political and economic upheavals; they came to Missouri largely because Gottfried Duden told them to. When Duden, a well-to-do lawyer from the district of Mulheim, decided that the German common people needed to leave Germany to improve their lot, he set himself the task of choosing a likely spot for them to settle. In 1824, he followed the American migration westward from Baltimore to St. Louis where he was favorably impressed with the land. Soon he bought a farm in Montgomery County (now Warren County) where he lived for two years. Since he was wealthy, he hired people to do the onerous tasks like clearing land and planting, leaving him free to travel, to meet Americans, and to study the area. When he returned to Germany, he wrote one of the generation's most influential books, *Report on a Journey to the Western States of North America*, in which he extolled the abundance of Missouri, its fertile land, and its friendly Anglo-American settlers. Thousands of his German followers came to Missouri in the next twenty years, most going directly to land on the Missouri River where they bought farms from the first movement of Anglo-American pioneers who were ready to move farther west.

Before the Anglos moved on, they taught the Germans techniques for taming the Missouri land—ways of felling trees, building fences, rolling logs, and stacking corn shocks, skills that the cultivated land in Germany no longer required.[1] If the men worked this closely together, it is likely that the women also met to share domestic knowledge; most likely this is how German women who had no tradition of quiltmaking learned to piece and to quilt.

We tend to think of the Germans as a homogeneous group en-

*Fig. 1. German towns on the Lower Missouri River included in this study.*

tirely separate from the Americans. This is not true. Several nineteenth-century writers speak of the friendly relations between the two groups.[2] Nor is it true that the Germans themselves were homogeneous. Some were aristocrats, others artisans, and still others peasants. Some spoke High German and others Low German. (The languages sometimes caused problems. When Mrs. Clara Kuschel began teaching in New Haven, she had to learn to speak Low German so she could communicate with the children in the town; later when she married, she and her husband spoke Low German to the family and High German when they didn't want the children to understand.[3] Because they had come from such diverse German provinces as Hanover, Prussia, Westphalia, Bavaria, and Saxony, their customs, attitudes, and beliefs were often quite different.[4]

When the German women began making quilts, their quilts were more like those of their American neighbors than unlike them; the variety of German traditions probably diluted the impact of any one design tradition.

Over time the newcomers kept some social customs from Germany, while adapting American farming and cooking methods to their needs, and learning to make quilts. In Germany, people

kept warm under woven coverlets, not quilts. In Missouri, both American and German women were notable weavers who wove not only coverlets but also heavy linen or cotton sheets and light woolen blankets.[5] In fact, home weaving was so common that weavers were warned not to immigrate to Missouri seeking work.[6]

For a time, women used both quilts and coverlets. Elsa Scheer of New Haven told me her mother gave each daughter feather pillows, coverlets, and three quilts when she married and that she had used all of hers.[7] Although everyone agrees that coverlets were brought from Germany, the origin of quiltmaking within the German community is not clear. At least one nineteenth-century writer refers to quilting bees in the German community, but he does so only in passing.[8]

None of the women I interviewed had an explanation for the making of the first Missouri-German quilts, but they were definite about how they learned to make quilts; their mothers taught them. They began by learning to piece. The winter she was eight, Gertrude Allgeyer and her sister pieced Four-Patch blocks which their mother later set together and quilted for them. They made so many blocks that each got two full-sized quilts.[9] Women recognized quiltmaking as an important skill. Even when a woman did not have time to quilt herself, she taught her daughters. Mrs. Herbert Kloppe of New Haven recalled, "I showed all my girls how to quilt, but with ten children I didn't have time to quilt myself."[10]

*Beginnings of Missouri-German Quiltmaking*

Very few nineteenth-century quilts have survived. In fact, of the 214 quilts I recorded, only twenty were made before 1900 and of these, only six before 1880. These dates are, of course, approximate. They come from family stories and from examining the textiles used in making the quilts.

The nineteenth-century quilts that have survived do not appear significantly different in design from the twentieth-century quilts. Only two (10 percent) of the twenty are appliqued; seven (35 percent) are stars. (In twentieth-century quilts, 7 percent are appliqued and 20 percent are stars.) One is clearly a masterpiece quilt which has been carefully preserved. Agnes Struckhoff says it is her grandmother's bridal quilt made in 1858.[10] A North Carolina Lily, it

has an appliqued border of flowers, vines, and birds. It is unusual in the Missouri-German area both for its elaborate design and for its age.

Other quilts may have survived because they were made for a special occasion—although that reason has been lost. Or it's possible that they survived through mere chance. I saw a collection of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century quilts at a farmhouse in Franklin County. When Regina Bolton Sullentrop died, her son stopped using her quilts, putting them away in bureau drawers where they remained until his death in 1984. These quilts, already worn from everyday use, would not have survived much more wear.

Actually, it may be surprising that any nineteenth-century quilts exist. Duden's first winter here (1824–25) was exceptionally mild; some immigrants, reading his account, believed such winters were the rule rather than the exception and arrived with few winter bedclothes. According to one respondent, they spent the winter struggling to keep warm and cursing Duden's advice.[12] If true, this story suggests that the climate demanded women make immediate provision for warm covers. But the climate was not the only demanding element of the new environment; the land was all-absorbing. Because Duden had not done his own work but had hired it, he grossly underestimated the sheer physical labor that creating a farm from virgin forest required. As women were active partners in the farms, they too spent hours doing essential back-breaking labor, with little time left over for domestic undertakings. Even as late as the 1900s, women did not have much time for quilting as pleasure. One woman told me her mother made two quilts every winter, one to use and one to put away so that she could start the next winter with at least one fresh quilt.[13] The family soon used up the quilts.

The great number of existing Missouri-German quilts date from the twentieth century with the time between the wars as the greatest reservoir. Most of these quilts derive from popular patterns. Women drew from patterns in mass magazines, shared designs from quilts in their families, and used the patterns in the German-language newspapers. These designs were usually one column wide and two to three inches long; the block design appeared but the pattern pieces were not provided. The quiltmaker was expected to be able to figure out for herself how to reproduce the design.

Mrs. Elsa Scheer of New Haven described one way patterns were passed in the early 1930s. "I saw this Broken Star in a magazine and mentioned to my mother-in-law (Mrs. John Scheer) that I had always wanted a quilt like that. She began it on my birthday and two months later gave it to me."[14] Women shared designs among themselves as well. Mrs. Herbert Kloppe of New Haven made an unusual (for Missouri-German quilts) Center Diamond quilt of white and salmon cottons for her hope chest before she married in 1938. She remembers interpreting a pattern of a quilt her sister owned.[15] Other women borrowed from newspaper designs. Mrs. Annie Hellemann of New Haven made a variation of Pickle Dish for her nephew's wedding in the thirties; she told her niece-in-law that she had taken it from a newspaper.[16] And still other women listened to the men. When Mrs. Paul Kuschel married in 1935, she made a Guiding Star for her husband. He recalled, "I loved to read and I had picked out this quilt pattern from *Capper's Weekly* long before I met my wife. I remember saying, 'If I ever get married, I hope my wife will make this quilt for me.' "[17] She did; it is still in pristine condition.

*Social Significance*

Families who have inherited quilts know not only the name of the maker but also the names of everyone who has owned the quilt; they proudly recite the quilt's provenance. For instance, Herbert Kloppe has an Oak Leaf, c. 1860, made by his grandmother, Louise Brune, that was passed down from Mrs. Brune to her daughter to Mr. Kloppe and will go to one of his children. Agnes Struckhoff has her grandmother's wedding quilt, and Stella Bockhous Nadler has her great-grandmother Maria Hackman Webbink's special occasion quilt which was used only at weddings, baptisms, and funerals. In each case, the family treasures the heirloom quilt, bringing it out of storage only for display and talking warmly of the woman who made it.

Many women have preserved quilts that were given to them as wedding presents and others cherish quilts as remembrances of women important to them. When Wanda Vollertsen Kropp died of double pneumonia in 1934 at the age of 33, she left four small daughters and several quilts. Each child was given one quilt by which to remember her mother.[18]

Women also made quilts as special presents for children and/or grandchildren. Before her death in 1931, Betts Theissen's mother made four Drunkard Path quilts one year as Christmas presents. She gave her daughters each a yellow-and-lavender one and her daughters-in-law each a green-and-pink one. Fred Trippe's mother made each of her five grandchildren a quilt and now his wife, Cora, is making quilts for *her* grandchildren.

The Missouri-German women also used quilts to mark special occasions. Rosemary Feldman of Dutzow has the Miniature Flower Garden her godmother, Mary Borgerding, gave her on the day of her baptism. Her parents used it in the crib in their room only on Sundays where, in turn, it covered Rosemary and her three younger siblings. They placed a matching full-sized Flower Garden on their bed; it, too, was used only on Sundays. Mrs. Harry Schiermeier owns another Sunday quilt, a crib-sized Trip Around the World, c. 1937, which was used to wrap the baby in church. (Sunday was a special day to the German women. Several spoke of quilts used only on Sunday and Mrs. Kloppe noted that she had special, embroidered pillowcases to replace the everyday ones of feed bags.)

Quilts also brought women together on sad occasions. Frieda Oelklaus' house burned in 1932 destroying the quilts she had stored in her cedar chest. When her friend, Mrs. Heitgard, heard about her loss, she brought her two quilts, a dark Nine Patch for everyday and a green-and-white for Sunday. Mrs. Oelklaus treasured both quilts for they provided not only physical warmth but also a concrete symbol of friendship.[19]

*Design Characteristics*

Because I was interested in quilts made before the German areas came in close contact with mainstream culture, I limited my study to quilts made before 1940. After World War II people moved frequently, the interstate highway system reduced the isolation of small towns, and St. Louisians began infiltrating the river area. Thus, the quilts in my study reflect the design tendencies of women who had only slight daily contact with the fads and fashions of the mainstream American culture.

Of the 214 quilts I recorded, the vast majority were full-sized, cotton, twentieth-century, pieced quilts. Only eight were crib-sized.

Of these, four are everyday quilts (three Nine Patch quilts and one Square Patch). The other four seem to have been celebratory quilts. Mary Borberding and her daughters Olivia Rohe and Roselind Moellering made a Miniature Flower Garden to mark the baptism of her godchild Rosemary Feldman in November, 1927. A whole-cloth crib quilt from the family of William Kiefer in Washington also appears to have been made for a christening. Made of fine quality cotton sateen and decorated with satin ribbon rosettes, it is clearly not intended for everyday use. The third quilt, a Trip Around the World, owned by Mrs. Harry Schiermeier, was designed to cover a baby in church. A much later quilt, Sunbonnet Sue, was made by Mrs. Schiermeier around 1940 for her own child.

Only two crazy quilts appeared, one in Hermann, the center of German wealth and culture, and one in New Melle, a tiny town about forty miles west of St. Louis. Nothing is known about the Hermann quilt, but the one in New Melle belongs to a Kamphoefner descendant. In the early 1900s, Hulda Kamphoefner's daughter worked as a nursemaid for the children of the chancellor of Washington University in St. Louis. She was allowed to come home once a year bringing with her the children's old clothes. From the velvets in them Hulda made her daughter a crazy quilt top. According to Alberta Toedebusch, owner of the quilt, Mrs. Kamphoefner never finished it because her daughter never married.[20] Mrs. Kamphoefner had exposure to wealth and city ways: crazy quilts are not typical of Missouri-German work.

Of the remaining 204 full-size quilts, seven are embroidered. Another sixteen are appliqued or have some applique on them. Seven of the sixteen are predominantly pieced with some applique; designs such as the North Carolina Lily which is pieced but has an appliqued stem or pieced flowers sitting in an appliqued pot account for five of the seven. The nine all-appliqued quilts include two Sunbonnet Sues, an Oak Leaf, a plume, four flowers, and one original cut-out design.

One hundred eighty-one (85 percent) are pieced quilts. At least in my sample, the quilt of choice is the full-sized pieced quilt.

The quilts' dominant characteristic reflects a dominant cultural characteristic of the German people; an emphasis on order. Although the quilts seem to have a great variety of designs, they are all built on a scaffolding of order in which the whole is more important

Fig. 2. Goose in the Pond *variation (c. 1900, made by Anna and Hulda Hoelcher, St. Charles) showing half and quarter blocks typical of Missouri-German quilts.*

than its parts. Quiltmakers use pattern, sets and sashing, color, and borders to emphasize the overall and to subordinate the parts.

About half the pieced quilts emphasize an all-over design. Full-size stars such as the Lone Star or the Broken Star are a particular favorite (15 quilts). Other popular all-over designs in which the individual blocks are obscured are the Wedding Ring (12 quilts) and the Irish Chain (11 quilts). Other designs, not obviously all-over, were arranged to emphasize the entire surface rather than the individual block. For instance, a Nine Patch made by Mrs. Heitgerd subordinates the block to the overall design by arranging the squares so that their background colors suggest a series of borders from the center outward. In another example, Agnes Struckhoff has played with the scale in her Single Wedding Ring so that the center block is four times the size of the regular block; it is bordered by the

smaller blocks. Finally, Ida Weber's Octagon quilt is arranged in concentric circles much like a Trip Around the World. Whether flower gardens, fans, axes, or small stars, these quilts use color or arrangement to emphasize the overall and to diminish the importance of the individual block. Perhaps this emphasis on the overall explains why so few representational quilts appear. In my study I found only twenty-four (including both pieced and appliqued): twelve flower quilts, four Sunbonnets, three Fans, two Baskets, and one Oak Leaf.

The pieced quilts with clearly defined blocks are roughly divided between those put together with alternating plain blocks (sets) and those with sashing. Most of the blocks, regardless of the method of construction, are set on their points. (In fact, the point construction was so common that I was never surprised to learn that a quilt set square was made by a relative in Illinois or Kansas.)

When blocks are set on their points, there is always extra space to fill where the block meets the edge. The Germans solved this problem by using half or quarter blocks. (See Figure 2.) Sometimes, they seem to add half blocks just to fill out the size. The Pomegranate, c. 1880–1900, by Regina Hellebusch of New Haven, adds half blocks to one side. (See Figure 3.) Although this technique seems to belie the German emphasis on order, it doesn't really. The partial blocks simply continue on with the design.

The sets and sashings in the German quilts provide an important element of order. Although the quiltmaker preferred using a limited number of fabrics, she sometimes had to use a variety of scraps. When she did so, she would "hide" the scrap blocks within a strong sashing or setting which would dominate the quilt, providing a sense of order. In her Improved Nine Patch, Mrs. Louis Brandes uses such a bright yellow in the setting that it dominates the pink and blue prints of the blocks. Verna Osthoff's Wild Goose Chase has strong green sets which unify the scraps. In a typical scrap quilt, the setting or sashing is so much stronger than the blocks that it creates an overall design of its own.

Most German quilts have a clearly organized color scheme. Typically, a quilt will use two, three, or four fabrics carefully planned and repeated. The large stars have a wider variety, but they too are precisely organized. If the quiltmaker used scraps, she used enough of one color (usually bright) to hold together and order the design.

*Fig. 3.* Pomegranate, *c. 1880–1900, made by Regina Hellebusch, New Haven.*

More often than not, this color was a brilliant yellow or strong pink. In either case, the fabric was almost always solid rather than printed. Invariably, this fabric was the strongest color in the quilt and dominated the design. For instance, Cora Trippe's Fan quilt uses bright yellow as the handle on each fan and as an important part of the border. In the 1930s, Mabel Maeckli's mother made a Trellis in which she used squares of sharp pink and bright yellow to unify her scraps. One particularly interesting quilt, known to the family as Depression, but which looks like a Snowball, was made by Nora Hahne's mother in New Haven during the Depression. Mrs. Hahne's daughter says her grandmother tried to use up all the scraps left from earlier sewing projects in her series of Depression quilts. (She made fifteen of these quilts during 1928–1933.) She used any scrap regardless of size, shape, color or design.[21] Nevertheless, the random collection of scraps is ordered through the repetition of one yellow print, always cut in the same size triangle and recurring regularly where the blocks are joined.

Borders in the German quilts are usually very simple, often one or more bands of contrasting colors quilted in a special border pattern. Sixty-four had no borders at all while another thirty-three had borders of three inches or less. Borders made of a design, whether pieced or appliqued, are extremely rare.

Although most of the quilts with borders have them on all four sides, some have borders on only two or three sides and one, the Oak Leaf, on only one side. Mrs. Kloppe explains, "The fourth side was not finished with points or borders because when we made up the beds we put pillows over the plain side. The old quilts had small borders because beds were square, in a wooden case with a thin mattress. We didn't need large quilts."[22]

Beginning in the 1930s, some women added folded points to the outside edges of some of their quilts, especially the show quilts like Broken Star. These later quilts also have wider borders, sometimes with several bands of contrasting color.

The preferred backing was muslin, often unbleached. Many quiltmakers believed the unbleached muslin was stronger than bleached and knew it would wash out whiter and whiter.[23] Fourteen quilts have solid colored cotton backings and ten have printed cotton backings. Of the remaining quilts, three have feed sack backs (one bleached and dyed), three have wool flannel, and one has a pieced back.

All the elements of the quilt from the choice of design to the plain backing emphasize a sense of order. The quilting design plays a subordinate role. The quiltmaker chose simple quilting designs, but arranged them on the surface to mark the various elements—block, set or sashing, and border: thus the quilting subtly acknowledges the different elements of the quilt without highlighting any one of them. Commonly, the quiltmaker emphasized the block design by quilting around its pieces; sets or sashings were quilted with simple flower or geometric designs. The second most popular quilting design is a grid, either straight or skewed to make diamonds, imposed on the pieced block. Again, the sets or sashing are treated with a different quilting design. A very few quilts have an over-all quilting design which covers both the block and the set. Border designs, which are almost always different from any other quilting design used on the surface, include cables, Greek key variations, stars, fans, flowers, and feathers. When the quiltmaker used a design like a

flower or feather which could be complex, she simplified it.

The more elaborate the quilt, the more elaborate the quilting design. Large stars in particular were treated to more complex quilting designs. For example, Elsa Sheer's Broken Star has rolling feathers in the corners and interlocking geometrics in the areas between the points while Viola Krueger's Broken Star has feather wreath quilting in the corners. Even these more elaborate designs, however, are subordinated to the overall design of the quilt; the quilting never calls attention to itself.

Despite the simple designs the Germans preferred, the quilting is often very finely done. Some women were justifiably proud of their skill. Anna Hoelcher Holtgraue and her twin sister Hulda Hoelcher Hackmann learned to quilt from their mother at their farm in St. Charles County in the early 1900s. When they married, they moved to neighboring farms. Although they quilted all their lives, and were in great demand at quiltings for their small, even stitches, they never invited anyone other than their mother to help them with their own quilts. None of their friends took umbrage because the sisters were acknowledged to be master quilters.[24]

Although the Missouri-German women came to quiltmaking rather late, they embraced it fervently. Their quilts differ subtly though definitely from those of their neighbors. Such regional variations bring to the study of quiltmaking a richness and depth that can lead to a greater understanding of the influences of cultural background and geographical location on quilt design. Eventually, perhaps, we will be able to piece together a reliable study of regional differences in quilts.

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5. Pickle Dish variation, c. 1930. Made by Annie Hellemann. Owned by Mrs. Andreas J. Meyer, New Haven.
6. Guiding Star, 1935. Made by Clara Kuschel. Owned by Paul Kuschel, New Haven.
7. Oak Leaf, c. 1860. Made by Louise Brune. Owned by Herbert Kloppe, New Haven.
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12. Nine Patch, c. 1930. Made by Mrs. Heitgerd. Owned by Frieda Oelklaus, St. Charles.
13. Crib-sized quilts:

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    Nine Patch, c. 1920. Made and owned by Marie Koch, Washington.

    Nine Patch, c. 1900. Made by member of the family of Ida Weber. Owned by Ervin Von Behren, New Haven.

    Square Patch, c. 1920. Made by a member of the family of Ida Weber. Owned by Ervin Von Behren.

    Whole-cloth crib quilt, c. 1920. Made by member of family of William Kiefer, Washington. Owned by the author.

    Sunbonnet Sue, c. 1940. Made and owned by Mrs. Harry Schiermeier, New Melle.
14. Crazy Quilt, c. 1880. Maker unknown. Collection of Brush and Palette Club, Hermann.

15. Crazy Quilt, c. 1910. Made by Hulda Kamphoefner. Owned by Alberta Toedebusch, New Melle.
16. Single Wedding Ring, c. 1938. Made and owned by Agnes Struckhoff, Augusta.
17. Octagon, c. 1910. Made by member of family of Ida Weber. Owned by Ervin Von Behren, New Haven.
18. Pomegranate, c. 1880–1890. Made by Regina Hellebusch, New Haven. Owned by the author.
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20. Wild Goose Chase, 1936. Made and owned by Verna Osthoff, Defiance.
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