

Uncoverings 1985

Volume 6 of
the Research Papers of
the American Quilt Study Group

Edited by Sally Garoutte

Missouri: Crossroads to Quilting

Bettina Havig

Missouri was the jumping off point for all three major western migration movements. The Santa Fe trail was primarily a trading route, but emigrants on the California and Oregon trails outfitted themselves in western Missouri for a grueling trek west. The trails were hard past the western line of the state, but the way into Missouri was well traveled. The route that now parallels Interstate 70 was first designated the "National Road" and brought travelers by wagon and public conveyance from Washington, D.C. to just west of St. Louis as early as 1810. Virtually every movement of migration shuttled people across Missouri and the quiltmakers both acquired and deposited ideas and designs perpetuated by quiltmakers.

The purpose of the comparative study undertaken here is to evaluate how closely Missouri quiltmaking traditions reflect the national scene, especially in the 19th century. Statistically good results may be obtained by looking at a sample of a population. In this case the population represented is the corpus of quilts made by American quiltmakers. The study compares results in two sample groups of this population: a sample of quilts made in Missouri, and a sample of quilts made in other states and found recently in Missouri. Since there is no precise measure of the population (that is the total number of quilts made), it is difficult to calculate fully the margin of error in the results of the two samples. The relatively narrow criteria for quilts in this project provided a sample group of 703 quilts.

Data and physical characteristics of the quilts in the study were collected over a fifteen month period, encompassing twenty-one "quilt days." Owners of the quilts volunteered to transport their quilt (or quilts) to a documentation event in their region. Each quilt was photographed and related information was collected from the

owner. Volunteers helped to measure the quilt and record pertinent physical characteristics of the quilt. For comparison of the two samples the following aspects were evaluated:

- ...is the quilt owned by a member of the quiltmaker's family?
- ...is the quilt signed and/or dated?
- ...does the quilt have borders?
- ...is the design unpublished (as far as known)?
- ...is the quilt pieced, appliqued, or a crazy quilt?
- ...is it significantly worn?
- ...is the quilt made primarily of scraps or from fabric purchased expressly for the quilt?
- ...is the quilt embellished richly with quilting and/or contains elaborate motifs?
- ...is the maker of the quilt known?
- and finally.
- ...what kind of binding or finishing technique was employed?

Quilts in the sample set not made in Missouri were made in Kentucky, Nebraska, Illinois, California, Kansas, Arkansas, Vermont, Tennessee, Indiana, South Carolina, Ohio, New York, Alabama, Virginia, Iowa, Pennsylvania, Texas, North Carolina, Maine, Florida, and New Jersey. In all, 22 states were represented, all with a strong tradition of quilting.

The project initially requested that owners of quilts made prior to 1900 have their quilts recorded. However, quilts made after 1900 were also submitted. Of the Missouri sample 21.05 percent of the quilts were post-1900, and 21.62 percent of the non-Missouri quilts were post-1900; the difference is within the range necessary to consider the two samples balanced for comparison.

Aside from the points of comparison, physical aspects of the quilts which reflect current consensus for dating quilts of unknown provenance were confirmed. Quilts which are of confirmed origin and date help us to uncover the secrets of those rootless pieces which come to view. This study is not designed to enumerate these characteristics in detail but to compare statistically certain general elements of style, heritage and provenance.

A surprising number of quilts were owned by members of the maker's family. In most cases the quilt was passed along through the maternal side of the family. It appears that interest and appreciation were a criteria for selection of a family recipient. This is a subjective

appraisal since no owner presented a quilt for which they had no affection. In the Missouri sample 65.59 percent of the quilts were owned by a family member and 71.69 percent in the non-Missouri group. The slight variance here might be attributed to the determination of a mobile population to tap back to their heritage.

Relatively few quilts were signed and dated; more were dated, and this practice was common in the case of crazy quilts. A majority of crazy quilts in both samples bore some date or commemorative swatch which helped place it on the time line. Even so, only 6.28 percent of the total Missouri sample and 8.10 percent of the non-Missouri sample were signed and/or dated.

Design and construction characteristics proved especially revealing to the volunteers who were all quiltmakers. Overwhelmingly, pieced quilts seemed the most popular mode of construction. In the Missouri sample 66.40 percent were pieced, 55.41 percent in the non-Missouri sample. For much of the 19th century Missouri was on the far western edge of readily available materials for quilting. In this researcher's opinion that "disadvantage" may have provided for and encouraged more creative use of the materials at hand.

Traditionally, pieced quilts have provided for the use of salvaged materials, left-overs and scraps traded by friends. It should be noted that the pieced quilts considered fell into three main categories; the traditional sort of pieced construction of individual cut geometric shapes seamed together, pressed construction, and English template piecing. Pressed construction was apparent in all pre-1890 log cabin variations made with wool or silks. Cotton log cabins were usually pieced in the traditional method. English template piecing accounted for all construction of wool and silk hexagon patterns and variations. Cotton quilts of these patterns using traditional piecing methods did not begin to appear until very late in the 19th century. Cotton pastel Grandmother's Flower Garden variations appeared post-World War I in both sample groups.

Scraps were the most popular source of materials used in the pieced quilts; 59.76 percent of the Missouri quilts were scrap quilts and 56.09 percent of non-Missouri quilts. Compare this figure with the ratio of scrap quilts in the entire sample. Of all the quilts studied 39.68 percent of Missouri quilts were scrap quilts and 31.08 percent of non-Missouri quilts were scrap quilts. (A 'scrap' quilt is one containing multiple fabrics.)

The Missouri quilt search demonstrated that its quiltmakers showed more ingenuity and originality in the patterns used. Quilts designated as "original" used patterns for which no published reference was known. In one case the original drawings and paper templates used to make the quilt were preserved as part of the quilt's heritage. Three times as many Missouri quilts as in the non-Missouri group could be designated original.

Many of these original quilts were appliqued. In both sample groups applique quilts made prior to 1880 were constructed of materials acquired just for the quilt. In color preference, red and green were consistently included accented equally by antimony orange or pink. In both samples only quilts which contained home-dyed fabrics used teal or blue-green and robin red or rusty brown in the place of green and red. Use of scraps in applique quilts began to appear consistently only after the turn of the century and primarily after World War I. In the last quarter of the 19th century indigo blue and wine-red slipped into the applique palette of both sample groups. In Missouri, applique quilts accounted for 16.22 percent of all quilts, while the non-Missouri sample contained 16.60 percent applique quilts.

The crazy quilt genre lasted a relatively short time but enjoyed great popularity. Because these quilts were usually made of non-washable fabrics (those considered special) quilt owners tended to think of the quilts as special. In all twenty-one quilt days the volunteers never failed to see a crazy quilt. Considering the short duration of its popularity the crazy quilt was a high proportion of those extant examples of quilting. In the Missouri sample 9.71 percent were crazy quilts. The non-Missouri sample was only slightly lower with 9.46 percent crazy quilts.

Many of the quilts presented were in fine condition, indicating an effort to preserve them and protect them from overuse. Condition of the quilts varied greatly. Some had clearly been used as household bedding for an extended period and then tucked away. Here too the relationship was strong, 18.42 percent and 18.02 percent for Missouri and non-Missouri quilts respectively could be categorized as utility quilts, due to their "used" condition.

In the final selection of quilts for the exhibition the majority of the pieces bore extraordinary quilting, several were richly embellished

with exquisite motifs and enhanced with stuffed work. The exhibition overstates the case. In each group just slightly over 10 percent of the quilts had such remarkable quilting. The majority of the quilts in both samples had straight line, parallel or in grids, and clamshell or fan quilting.

A reflection of the fact that so many quilts were owned by family is the number of quilts for which the maker is known. In most cases one was an indicator of the other. There were exceptions in which the family still owned the quilt but were uncertain of which relative made it or in which the quilt had been collected outside of the family but with retention of the maker's identity. Almost identical results are noted here. Of the Missouri sample 66.40 percent were made by a maker whose identity is known. In the non-Missouri sample 66.22 percent have a known maker.

A surprising characteristic is an extremely accurate determinor of 20th century origin. The binding or finishing technique became an important indicator in the study. Quilts were finished with separate binding, by pulling the front to the back or back to the front and by use of cord, ribbon or woven tape. There was *no* quilt in the study with bias binding which could be attributed to any date earlier than 1890. The most common technique especially on cotton quilts was the application of a separate binding cut from strips on the straight grain of the fabric. This method combined with a technique of bringing the back over to the front accounted for nearly 75 percent of the quilts in both samples.

The premise that Missouri quilts are representative of quilts throughout the country is well borne out by the data. While some sorts of quilts such as Baltimore Album and Broderie Perse are conspicuously absent in Missouri, for the greater part Missouri represents a microcosm of the national scene. Pieced quilts, especially scrap pieced quilts, was the only category of quilt appearing in significantly higher proportion in Missouri than in the non-Missouri sample.

The accompanying chart recaps the data with the addition of a column which recombines the total percentages of quilts documented.

<i>Percentage of</i>	<i>Missouri</i>	<i>non-Missouri</i>	<i>all quilts</i>
Quilts owned by a member of the quiltmaker's family	65.59	71.62	66.19
Quilts signed and/or dated	6.28	8.10	6.51
Quilts with borders	28.34	22.97	27.64
Quilts of original (unpublished) design	8.10	2.70	7.39
Pieced quilts	66.40	55.41	64.96
Appliqued quilts	16.60	16.22	16.55
Crazy quilts	9.71	9.46	9.68
Utility quilts (well used)	18.42	18.92	18.49
Scrap quilts	39.68	31.08	38.56
Made from fabric expressly for the quilt	34.01	35.14	34.15
Richly embellished quilting	10.12	10.81	10.21
Maker known	66.40	66.22	66.37