Uncoverings 1985

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

Edited by Sally Garoutte

Quilts, Quiltmaking, and the *Progressive Farmer:* 1886–1935

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The *Progressive Farmer* is a farm journal which has been and still is widely read by farm families in the southeastern part of the United States. I have examined on microfilm this publication from its first publication in 1886 through 1935 for references in it to quilts, quilting, and quiltmakers. An important aspect of this research is the nature and history of the publication itself.

Leonidas Lafayette Polk was the founder of the *Progressive Farmer.* Having served as a colonel in the Confederate Army he returned to his North Carolina farm after the Civil War and was distressed at the condition of farms and the farm families in North Carolina. In this state, in which 72% of the residents lived on farms, there was no department of agriculture, no opportunity for agricultural education for young persons, and very little support from the state legislature for farms and farmers.

Although the north and south were deeply divided at that time, Colonel Polk urged farmers from all parts of the country to put aside sectional differences and work together to effect changes which would improve the situation of farms and farm families throughout the country. He decided to publish a farm newspaper to get his message across. In this publication farmers were encouraged to organize clubs in their communities. The community organizations combined to form a statewide network which then became a part of the Farmers National Alliance and Cooperative Union. Colonel Polk moved to Washington, D.C. in 1891 when he became president of the national Alliance.

Although the alliance itself was an educational organization and therefore could not become or endorse a political party, many of its

members were in sympathy with and shared the goals of the new Populist party. L.L. Polk seemed likely to become the Populist candidate for President of the United States in the 1892 elections. However, he died before the nominating convention was held.

After his death, the *Progressive Farmer* continued publication, but without his leadership circulation dwindled. A new era began in 1897 when Clarence Poe, a sixteen year old farm boy, wrote a letter to the *Progressive Farmer* advocating tax supported education for every child, regardless of color or creed. Impressed by this letter, the editor offered him a job. Two years later, at age eighteen, Clarence Poe became editor. In 1903 he and four friends purchased the *Progressive Farmer.* Poe remained editor for more than fifty years, and was active for ten more years as chairman of the board and then president. During his tenure the *Progressive Farmer* expanded beyond North Carolina to states throughout the Southeast and Texas, merging with or buying out fifteen other farm journals. In 1911 publication headquarters moved to Birmingham, Alabama. In the 1960s the company launched two magazines *(Southern Living* and *Decorating and Crafts Ideas)* and a book publishing division (Oxmoor House). Early in 1985 the Southern Progress Company (formerly Progressive Farmer Company) was bought by Time, Inc.

The *Progressive Farmer* was designed for the entire farm family. In addition to information specifically related to farming it contained state, national, and international news; scientific, religious, and literary items such as poetry and serialized novels. Editorials urged the cultivation of the minds as well as the farms of farmers and their families, including the women and girls. The publication was active politically and urged support of issues and candidates favorable to farm families.

Even in the early days women and their interests were not overlooked. Women were accepted as full members of the farmers' alliances with all the rights and privileges, but without any dues or fees. Education for women was encouraged. In every issue there were items designed to be of interest to women readers. In keeping with the attitude of the times, women's interests were perceived to be household hints, tips on canning, recipes, fashion notes, and the like. As early as May, 1893, there was an issue "All for the Ladies."

References to quilts were scarce in the early years. During the period of Polk's editorship (1886–1892) the word "quilting" appeared

only twice. In 1886 directions were given for making a "soft quilt," which was actually a comfort (also referred to as a "comfortable" or "comforter"). The other was a comment in an 1887 issue that "a small foot afghan or crazy quilt is seen on many made up beds."

Between 1893 and 1900 there was a woman's page called "Our Home Circle and Social Chat." Aunt Jennie, later revealed as the daughter of Colonel Polk, presided over this page. Readers were encouraged to write. In these letters, among the recipes, household advice, laundry lessons, canning tips and such, were a few more references to quilting:

1895: "When you go to make soft soap or have a quilting..."

1898: "One of my aunts had a quilting the other night and all we girls went...."

A reader gives directions for making a pillow using a crazy quilt square.

"I am making a quilt that has 1850 pieces."

"Girls should learn to sew when they are five years old. Have them make doll dresses and piece quilts."

1899: A reader suggested saving all floursack scraps, cutting them into one-half inch squares and coloring them for quilt pieces. She wrote that she had machine pieced two quilts from these pieces, one red and drab, another blue and tan. She further reported that the brickwork pattern would be speedier to piece, and that comforts required less work than quilts.

Another 1899 reader wrote that six flour sacks were sufficient for the lining of a medium size quilt.

Between 1901 and 1910 the *Progressive Farmer* grew. Circulation by 1909 was 70,000. "Larger circulation than any other daily, weekly, or monthly between Richmond and Atlanta," the masthead proclaimed.

"Our Home Circle and Social Chat" continued. Aunt Mary, a trained home economist, took over in 1906 when Aunt Jennie's nerves forced her to retire. Neither woman was employed full time or had her name on the masthead.

There were more references to handwork of all sorts. Fine needlework was described as "all the rage." Crocheting was "fashionable." "Light fancy work" (defined as embroidery, silk embroidery, battenberg embroidery, crochet, and lace making) was recommended for the tired woman. Instructions for knitting a sweater and making a

rag rug were published. There was an increasing amount about quilting:

In 1901 a letter referred to a four year old who pieced a bedquilt in the "difficult over and over stitch."

In 1902 Aunt Jennie wrote that many ladies preferred to piece quilts in the summertime, "one star or square at a time and then before you realize how much you have done, the quilt is finished."

In 1903 a reader named Nellie requested Aunt Jennie to "give us a little space in our department to exchange quilt patterns." Aunt Jennie replied that she could grant Nellie's request if Nellie could describe the pieces so others could understand the shape. Otherwise it would cost a lot to reproduce.

1905: "I am spending my time making quilts and reading."

"I save all scraps and have pieced ever so many quilts and dearly love in winter to be at something like that."

"Winter evenings are times for man to rest, children to be amused and lulled, and the woman to catch up with darning, quilt squaring, patching, rug weaving and such other wifely employments."

1910: "Some people use old clothing to make quilts, but I never thought they lasted long enough to pay for the trouble in that way, so I piece up old clothing as for quilts and use two of them to go between the top and lining of a new quilt. You could use more, but two seem of sufficient thickness. They are easy to wash and the filling does not shift in the wringing."

In 1909 the North Carolina State Fair offered premiums for quilts. But not everyone agreed about quilts.

1907: "As for quilts, I think they are very undesirable in this day when woolen blankets and light counterpanes may be had so cheaply. I think it is equally foolish to waste time piecing quilts and to waste strength in washing them. I don't like quilts and featherbeds and think they belong to days of cooking on a pot rack. . . ."

1909: "Never use quilts or comforts as they are germ breeders. Use all woolen blankets covered by a white or colored counterpane instead."

During the period 1911 through 1920 the *Progressive Farmer* grew to 100,000 subscribers, which they speculated meant 500,000 readers. There were more articles by professionals. The *Progressive Farmer* was evolving from a publication which urged farm families to be in-

formed and educated into a *means* by which they were informed and educated.

The woman's page was titled "Our Farm Women." Mrs. W.N. Hutt was employed as full time home editor and her name appeared on the masthead. A correspondence course in domestic science was offered and domestic science clubs recommended for men, boys, and girls.

In 1917 emphasis in handwork was on knitted helmets, socks, and wristlets for "our boys over there." "Crocheted lace may come back after the war, but now it is our duty to knit, roll bandages, make clothes, and save wool for the boys."

In 1919 "Embroidery and crochet we can now resume in moderation." During this period women's suffrage was discussed in a spirited manner. The editor of the woman's page wrote in favor of it and commented "In regard to the objection we often hear that woman will lose her exalted position if she stoops to vote,...that exalted position which she enjoys is breaking her back slaving over a wash tub."

After the passage of women's suffrage legislation the discussion turned to "What shall a woman wear to the polls?" and "Need she tell her age when she votes?" In 1920 it was stated that it was acceptable for women over fifty to wear colors other than white, gray, black, and purple.

There was a lot more about quilting:

In 1912 a Wadesboro woman wrote: "Why not make quilts at home?" She describes passing a neat, humble cottage where a woman in the doorway had in her hand a blue and white quilt square in the Loveknot pattern. "I thought of how much comfort she was getting out of those quilt squares. She could not embroider centerpieces if she had been able to buy the linen, as her hands were stiff and rough from field work, so the little calico pieces which she had saved from the girls' dresses and the boys' shirtwaists were combined into a prettily designed quilt."

"We are told nowadays that time is too precious to make scrap quilts and that blankets are too cheap. What would the mother of the humble country home do throughout the long winter days if it were not for the quilts she makes..."

"I do not advocate making the Irish Chain of 1" blocks, the

Hexagon, which is so hard to fit, the Saveall and the Old Maid's Ramble, nor the Tulip and the Sunflower, which have been handed down from one generation to the next."

"I think there is just as much art in making these old time designs with the tiny stitches as the making of beautifully embroidered table linens."

In the March 15, 1913 issue, the Ladies' Art Company advertised a book of 450 quilt patterns containing the "prettiest, queerest, scarcest, most grotesque patterns ever though of, from log cabins to stars and puzzle designs, also crazy stitches and circulars. All sent postpaid for six 2¢ stamps or a silver dime."

Also in 1913 the woman's editor reported that she had tried unsuccessfully to sell patched quilts, although she has had inquiries for "old fashioned woven wool quilts." She also advised sleeping under a loosely woven blanket. "Let the lovely but heavy old quilt be used for couch covers, etc."

In 1915 a fund raising fair was described with a booth for every letter of the alphabet, selling items beginning with that letter. The "Q" booth was to sell quilts. In October of that year an old fashioned quilting bee was suggested and well carded wool was said to be lighter and warmer for the filling.

In 1917 the word "Quilts" appeared in the *Progressive Farmer* index for the first time.

In 1918 directions were given for machine quilting, rolling the quilt "catacorners" on two poles and "unrolling as you go."

A reader wrote that flour sacks bought from a baker were cheaper than any other goods of the same quality. Four sacks would suffice for a quilt lining. For the top it was suggested that they be dyed—half one color, half another.

In 1920 the North Carolina State Fair offered a $1 premium for quilts under "homemade fabrics." Categories were: silk quilt, cotton patchwork quilt, applique quilt or bedspread, or quilting done on a quilt.

From 1921 through 1930 the *Progressive Farmer* was called *Progressive Farmer and Farm Woman* and claimed to be the world's largest circulated independent farm journal. It was published in four regional editions, and the woman's page was titled "The Progressive Farm Woman."

There were many references to quilts:

"Quiltpiecing is an old fashioned art, but an art that should be revived."

"Every little girl can piece a quilt."

In 1924 there were ads for quilt fabrics: "Big Bargain roll—all beautiful patterns and colors in percales, cretonnes, crepes, gingham, in just what you want for crazy quilts or pillows. 2 lbs of fabric for 89¢"

2½ yards of fancy assorted quilt pieces were offered for $1.29, and there were other ads for remnants.

In 1926 there was an issue on cotton, encouraging quilting bees as a means of promoting the use of cotton. "The silkworm is a greater menace than the boll weevil."

In 1927, under the heading "Grandmother's Quilts Becoming Popular Again" six quilt patterns were pictured. They could be ordered from the *Progressive Farmer* for 15¢ each. Patterns included Airship (said to date its origin to the very earliest days when airships were merely being talked about), Grandmother's Basket, Tree of Paradise (from a block "over 100 years old") and Tulip Wreath.

"Missionary societies of many churches are filling their treasuries by making quilts."

In 1929 Mrs. Hoover, as an inaugural gift, was given a 7′ x 8′ Yale blue and white Double Irish Chain quilt made from six flour sacks by Mrs. J.L. Murray, McLean County, Illinois. 1100 yards of thread were used in the quilting.

Because of the success of the earlier offering, seven more patterns were offered in 1929.

In 1930 twenty-one home demonstration clubs in Fannin County, Texas, made quilts and were pleased to sell eighteen of them in forty-five minutes for a total of $234.75. The average price was $13.00. One even sold for $17.50.

During the 1930–35 period the title changed to *Progressive Farmer and Southern Ruralist* and it was published monthly instead of weekly. The editor of the "Progressive Farm Women" section changed twice. In 1935 Miss Sallie Hill became editor and remained in that position for twenty-seven years then became senior editor of the *Progressive Farmer.*

During this period there was a contest for the best letter by a

woman on the subject: "I can have a radio or a washing machine—which is best?" (56% preferred a washer which "banishes all grouchiness" to a radio which "brings more sunshine into our lives.")

As to quilting:

In 1931, encouraged by the success of the previous offerings, four patchwork books were offered, each with twelve old time quilt designs with exact cutting patterns and detailed instructions. Four books cost 50¢. Later that year four more were offered because of the widespread success of the first offering.

In 1932 a Mountain Mist ad offered a quilt pattern with each 81 x 96 quilt batting. In 1933 there was an item about the popularity of quilting and a leaflet entitled "Quilting Is In Fashion Again" was offered. It was recommended that, in planning a quilt, one should buy enough fabric for a 16" protector to be basted to the top of the quilt.

In 1934 and 1935 there were many more quilt patterns described and illustrated, including Cactus, Goatshead, Oriental Splendor, Bear's Paw, Village Green, Caesar's Crown, Grecian Star, Fox and Goose, and Windmill. There were also a great many ads for quilt pieces.

From this information it is difficult to draw significant conclusions about the role of quiltmaking in the lives of the readers of the *Progressive Farmer* during the period studied. However, a reasonable assumption is that some quiltmaking went on during the entire period and that interest in quiltmaking increased greatly beginning around 1910 and worked up to the quiltmaking frenzy of the 1930s.

To summarize:

The years between 1886 and 1900 were devoid of any meaningful mention of quilts and quilting. It should be pointed out, however, that when quilting *was* mentioned, it was in a very matter of fact way, as if referring to an ongoing, routine activity which was a part of everyday life:

> "One of my aunts had a quilting...."
>
> "When you go to make soft soap or have a quilting..."
>
> "I am making a quilt...."
>
> There are several suggestions for the use of flour sacks in a quilt.

(Note that there are not a lot of references to other forms of handwork either. "Fancy work" is referred to a number of times, but does not seem to include quilting.)

Clearly, the *Progressive Farmer,* although widely read, was not a means by which patterns and directions for handwork were passed along during this period.

From 1901–1920, even with the emphasis on handwork for "our boys over there" in the latter part of this time, it appears that there was a definite revival of interest in quiltmaking. Quilting bees were mentioned; quilt pieces advertised; the Ladies Art Company book of patterns was advertised in 1913; and the North Carolina State Fair twice offered a premium for quilts. There is still some discussion about the superiority of the blanket over the quilt. The word "Quilts" appears in the index for the first time.

From 1920–1935 references increased each year. In 1923 quilting is referred to as "an old fashioned art" which should be revived. There were ads for bundles of quilt fabrics, references to quilts as fund raisers for church missionary societies and, in 1929, a quilt was considered a appropriate inaugural gift for Mrs. Herbert Hoover.

The *Progressive Farmer* offered quilt patterns: six in 1927, seven more in 1929, two groups of forty eight each in 1931. By 1935 quilt patterns were regular and frequent offerings in the *Progressive Farmer.* As the title of the 1933 leaflet announced: "Quilting Is In Fashion Again."

One final comment is that in this publication for this fifty year period there is a wealth of social history, not the least of which is a glimpse into the changes in the lives of women from 1886 through 1935.