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Quilt Blocks? — or — Quilt Patterns?

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There has been little written about how nineteenth and early twentieth century quiltmakers collected, recorded and exchanged patterns. Several authors have touched on the subject, but Dolores Hinson, writing for *The Antiques Journal* in 1970, delved deeper, referring to collections of quilt blocks as "Quilters' Catalogs." She stated that these "were made by quilters as reference files of patterns. Paper was scarce and books of quilt patterns were totally unknown."¹ An article discussing "Old-Time Patchwork" in *The Ladies' Home Journal* in 1922 commented that "patterns were eagerly exchanged"² and Clementine Paddleford, about 1927 or 1928, asserted "Pioneer women exchanged patterns and pieces as housewives today trade recipes."¹³

Other observations have been: "Many of the quilt blocks we find today were sample pattern blocks never meant to be incorporated into a quilt top..."⁴ "It was customary to make a block of a pattern to keep for reference, and some quilters had a collection of blocks, occasionally with the name of the pattern pinned to the block."⁵ "...a new design would be held in memory and the block pieced when the seamstress was back in her house to be stored as a "sketch" for future reproduction..."⁶ "These... frequently included single blocks of both pieced and patched designs."⁷ One may occasionally see a quilt made up of these blocks, though I suspect that some were put together by a later generation and not by the original maker of the blocks.

"There was always a neighbourly and friendly interest taken in such collections, as popular designs were exchanged and copied many times..."⁸ "Some collections... were extensive and were handed down in families from generation to generation."⁹

We've now heard statements from Dolores Hinson, Patsy and Myron Orlofsky, Ruth McKendry, Jonathan Holstein and Marie Webster, as well as two early magazines, which illustrate that the idea is not a new one but is a plausible one as I will attempt to explore.

It has been my own experience to purchase eight such collections over the past several years. Some were large collections containing more than seventy-five examples while others were small in scope. In each case the fabrics in the blocks generally span a century in time (as early as the 1840s continuing into the 1930s) and, overall, each block was of a different design. Many of them were badly stained, their fabrics softened by much handling down through the years. Usually, when a collection contained two or more blocks of the same design, each block would prove to be different in size or was made up in different color combinations from different time periods, often with light and dark reversed.

The larger collections seem to demonstrate the expertise, or the lack thereof, of more than one maker. However, I recently learned of one explanation for this. During a conversation with Kansas quilt-maker Lillie Webb, she related that these less-exacting blocks do not necessarily indicate a lack of sewing skills. When recording or sharing a pattern even the most skilled seamstress might sometimes quickly "throw together" a block without regard to fabric colors, contrasts or workmanship simply to "give the idea of the pattern." (In Lillie's words, "roughly together.") These blocks were included with paper pattern pieces so the recipient could see their relationship. Lillie went on to explain that her mother was "a beautiful hand seamstress. She could make the nicest, tiniest little stitches, and so fast! I never could master the way she did it."¹⁰

Sometimes, a collection will include one or more blocks with missing pieces which had been there at one time indicating that, at some point, more fabric of a certain color or print style had been needed and the quilter simply went to her pattern collection to "swipe" a piece of material here or there. Or, perhaps she used them as pattern pieces.

One also finds unfinished blocks. Did she not like the design or did she just tire of its making? Or perhaps she had gone far enough with it to either remember the rest of it or to know that she liked it

well enough to go ahead and make a complete quilt. And one discovers designs in these pattern collections that cannot be found and identified in published material. Are these examples of an "original design" or examples of memory and time playing tricks? Without written notes, we may never know.¹¹

Unfortunately, when a seamstress comes into the possession of a collection, she has the inclination to "finish the unfinished" and sew the blocks together into a quilt. I firmly believe this should *not* be done and feel the blocks should be preserved in their individual form.

Two classic collections have been illustrated in recent books. Twenty-four blocks attributed to Mrs. Mary Ellen Wood, a nineteenth century Canadian resident, are pictured in *Traditional Quilts and Bed Coverings* by Ruth McKendry.¹² And twenty-nine Pennsylvania examples from Jane Brosius Rothermel (1877-1936) are included in the 1985 book by Jeanette Lasansky, *In the Heart of Pennsylvania*.¹³

Is it possible that further research might show regional differences in forming these collections? The three quilters interviewed for this paper have roots in several states: Kentucky, Illinois, Missouri, Kansas and California, yet two of them remember mothers, grandmothers or great-grandmothers having quilt block pattern collections. Three interviews are far from being definitive especially when related to the many thousands of quiltmakers across America. But the response to these collections in central Pennsylvania research seemed to be less enlightening. Conversations with seventeen quilters, most born during the first decade of this century, revealed that "most of their patterns were obtained through trading with family or neighbor ladies..." but "few of (them) remembered seeing a collection of "sample" patches..." The Oral Traditions Project, apparently aware of the existence of them, located only three collections within a seven county area during its initial research.¹⁴

Pattern Sources

As recently as fifty-four years ago, rural women found themselves isolated for periods of time. In a letter from one quiltmaker to another dated February 12, 1932 near Jewell, Kansas, Gertrude relates to Gladys:

We...didn't get any mail for two days and then we didn't expect any to-day but he went. The roads froze last night so he could go. Last night Ruth & Robert had to walk & lead their horse from north of Abrams on home. The wheels would ball up till they wouldn't turn. Bob got behind the buggy & pushed. They broke the harness & had a terrible time. Mrs. Maud Mitchell said there were fourteen cars stuck yesterday past their place. The roads are worse than we ever saw them. Of course the highways are some better but the sand has sunk into the mud till one hardly knows they are graveled...Ray is going to town while roads are frozen. 24°.

Then she proceeds to tell about the basket quilt for which she plans to finish the blocks later that day from the scraps left from her children's clothes and how her husband "has taken more interest in this quilt than any other one I have made."¹⁵

Letters have been a convenient means of exchanging patterns¹⁶ for many generations and Gertrude goes on to tell Gladys that "I am going to send you the pattern (of the basket quilt) so you can make a quilt...if you care too (sic)." Unfortunately, we do not know if she did so with that particular letter, a future one, or if at all.

We have read many times about the popularity of and the circumstances surrounding quilting bees throughout the last century and continuing into this century. New patterns were carried away from these get-togethers,¹⁷ either in memory or "in cloth." And county and state fairs, with their displays of everything imaginable that could be produced by loving and talented hands, were another source of patterns¹⁸ for the rural quiltmaker as well as the urban quiltmaker. Miss Ethel Vanderwilt of Solomon, Kansas made five sketches, hand-drawn in pencil and hand-colored with watercolors, of quilts she had seen at state fairs in Topeka and Hutchinson in 1921 and 1925. She faithfully reproduced one of these, a Broken Star, which sold at her estate auction in 1985.¹⁹

The country peddler, sometimes referred to as an itinerant peddler or kitchen merchant,²⁰ undoubtedly was another source of patterns for the quiltmaker. We know that tinsmiths of the time, many of whom were itinerant peddlers, produced both quilt and quilting patterns of cut tin.^{21, 22} Edward Sands Frost, a Maine tinsmith and

Figure 1. Quilt block used as a pattern and guide. Print fabric is bright green on a deep navy background with small yellow dots. Author's collection.

peddler of the 1860s and 1870s, created metal stencils and stamped these designs on burlap to be sold door-to-door for rug-hooking.²³ While not *quilt* patterns, his ingenuity illustrates that an alert and talented merchant observed the world around him in an attempt to better the life of his customers while also increasing his sales of merchandise.

Publications such as *Peterson's* and *Frank Leslie's* magazines, *Godey's Lady's Book* and *Family Friend*, as well as several needlework books, occasionally included patchwork patterns during the mid-nineteenth century.²⁴ But, with some exceptions, these patterns

were not the ones near and dear to American quiltmakers. However, by 1886 familiar patterns with familiar names were beginning to appear in magazines such as *Farm and Fireside* where four designs were offered in the December 1st issue. There was no commentary about them other than the brief statement "We present, this time, four new quilt patterns and several most excellent patterns of laces."²⁵ In June 1890 the editor ran a two-part article on patchwork but reverted to the habits of the earlier magazines by including designs and names similar to those which had previously been published in *Godey's* and others.²⁶ But they did offer one important thing this time which the earlier publications rarely did—full-size diagrams of the pieces needed for each design.

Three events during the last decades of the nineteenth century eventually led to new pattern sources for the quiltmaker. The first of these was the discovery of an inexpensive method of making paper from wood pulp. For centuries paper had been made by hand from cotton or linen, a slow and expensive process making it neither easily available nor affordable. Consequently the demand for it was minimal and used mostly by early printers. A series of discoveries and inventions stretching from 1750 until after the Civil War led to more effective methods of mass-producing paper and of making paper from wood. By the mid-1880s, wood pulp paper was cheap and abundant.²⁷ The second event occurred during this same decade—the creation of the first early form of the linotype machine, revolutionizing the printing industry and making efficient the previously time-consuming process of hand-setting type.²⁸ These two events, combined, led to the availability of more books, newspapers and magazines than had ever been known. Of these three, magazines in particular soon became the prime source by which quiltmakers would exchange their patterns through needlework columns and reader-exchange columns.

The third event began in 1872 when Aaron Montgomery Ward and George R. Thorne started a mail-order business in the loft of a livery stable in Chicago by distributing their first "catalog," a single sheet of paper listing a small variety of dry goods items. Fourteen years later, Sears, Roebuck and Company experienced its humble beginnings in Minnesota.²⁹ The convenience of shopping at home quickly caught on, particularly in rural areas, and many other

Figure 2. Sixteen Carolina Lily blocks in various stages of completion, circa 1870. Their pattern block, slightly larger, contains prints from the 1850s. Author's collection.

entrepreneurs seized upon the new idea, among them the Ladies' Art Company in St. Louis.

Started in 1889, Ladies' Art became an innovator in the field of quilt patterns using mail-order as its tool of distribution.³⁰ Along with art needlework and gadgets, they were advertising 400 different quilt patterns by 1897 and 500 by November 1922. The 1928 catalog, which went through several printings and revisions, eventually listed 530 designs.³¹ Paper pattern pieces for these were all available to the quiltmaker: one pattern for 10¢, three for 25¢, or seven for 50¢. The ambitious woman could order fifteen for \$1.00! For a price considerably higher than the paper pattern, she could order a finished block of calico or silk.³² There were also numerous catalogs of applique and quilting designs, some containing even more pieced designs.³³

The Modern Art Company, New Haven, Connecticut, ran an advertisement in an 1891 issue of *Farm and Fireside* magazine for "Three Beautiful Quilt Patterns. Diagrams Full Size, new and elegant designs, all different. Sent by return mail, with catalogue of specialties, for only 10¢."³⁴

An enterprising woman in Clinton, South Carolina placed an advertisement in *Home Magazine* in 1902 for

Quilt Patterns. Cut paper patterns with diagrams of square will be supplied for 5 cents or 3 for 10 cents. Pieced square with cut paper pattern 12 cents. 400 styles from which to choose. Address MISS MAMIE PEARSON.³⁵

The magazines themselves seemed slow to recognize the economic advantages of supplying mail-order quilt patterns although patterns for dresses and other clothing had existed for some years.³⁶ About 1909, *Ladies' Home Journal* offered a transfer pattern which included one pieced and two applique designs and yet another one in the January 1912 issue for two applique designs by Marie D. Webster.³⁷ *Farmer's Wife* magazine from St. Paul, Minnesota offered quilt patterns by mail in their December 1912 issue.³⁸

Apparent resistance (possibly a holdover from the attitude that patchwork was so simple as to not need instructions)³⁹ can be seen within the pages of *Farm and Fireside* from Springfield, Ohio. Towards the end of 1911,⁴⁰ they published another article illustrating quilt designs which included, this time, very small diagrams of the pieces (not full-size as they had done in 1890). But at the end of the text in the "EDITOR'S NOTE—We do not furnish the patterns for these quilt designs."⁴¹ This leads one to believe they had been receiving requests from their readership for the patterns they had published in previous issues. Apparently, even with this notation they continued to receive requests because, when they published seven more designs four months later, the Editor's Note read a little differently:

So many of our subscribers have written to us, asking for quilt-block patterns, that we have decided to furnish them. Tissue-paper patterns and directions for making these quilt-blocks will be forwarded to anyone on receipt of ten cents in coin or stamps.⁴²

In the January 4, 1913 issue, they offered six more designs along with the comment that

Makers of quilts have been besieging us with requests for new patterns. In response to these requests the Fancy-Work Editor has selected six of the very prettiest quilt-blocks that have been submitted to us for this department . . .⁴³

Mail-order for quilt patterns via the magazines was now firmly established. But old habits and familiar ways are difficult to change. Seeing a quilt, or top, or even a block, in front of you—"in the cloth"—in color—has always been and will continue to be more striking and more memorable than any black and white illustration or sketch. Even though paper patterns and illustrations were everywhere around them (and these *were* collected) as the twentieth century progressed, quiltmakers continued to gain ideas from their neighbors' and relatives' quilts as their mothers and grandmothers had done before them.

Oma Haines, another Kansas quiltmaker, remembered her grandmother's box of quilt block patterns in detail: "It was in a great big shirt box like they used to pack shirts six in a box. I wouldn't even begin to guess how many there were, but they were pieced blocks and she had the patterns basted to each block with several stitches of thread." These pattern pieces were also cloth. When she wanted to make one of the designs, she removed them to use in making her cardboard patterns. She also used buckram, a very stiff material. The designs had been gathered from friends and relatives because "People were more dependent on one another in those kind of days than they are now." This was her "pattern box" and whatever happened to it, Oma doesn't know. It was kept on top of the chiffonier in Grandma's bedroom out of the reach of an inquisitive young girl but was brought down often. Many pleasant and memorable hours were spent by grandmother and granddaughter poring over the pretty patterns and colors. The time period remembered was about 1920 to 1930.⁴⁴

Lillie Webb has similar remembrances. "When somebody would go to a friend's house and see a quilt that they liked, usually that person made a block, (sometimes) just out of anything, just so they had the pattern and they'd make it up and send it to them or give it to them." Lillie still has some of these pattern blocks. As a child, she went along to quilting bees with her mother and grandmother but doesn't recall going to fairs.⁴⁵

Pansy Smith has "always just loved to sew." Her grandmother lived with them throughout the fall and winter months during Pansy's formative years. Three generations spent many a winter evening sitting in front of the fire in their farmhouse about sixty

miles east of Springfield, Missouri, cutting pieces for quilts and sewing them together while Pansy's father would often pop corn. Although Mother was more tolerant about her young daughter's seams ("you can do better next time"), Grandmother wasn't! " 'Honey, that won't do. You got to do it all over again.' And that's what she meant. I'd have to do it over several times. It got to looking kind of rugged time I got it done." Neighbors helped neighbors in those days and on occasion two or three ladies would come for an afternoon and help Pansy's mother and grandmother quilt. They exchanged patterns by making sample blocks for each other. The *Weekly Kansas City Star* and *Capper's Weekly* (from Topeka, Kansas) were the popular newspapers and the quilt patterns they contained were clipped, saved *and* used. But Pansy's family never bought patterns nor did they send away for them. The family always went to the county fair. One year, young Pansy dressed "a huge, big doll," entered it in competition and won ribbons for it. There was always competition in the household to see who would be the first to sleep under a new quilt because whatever was dreamed that night would come true.⁴⁶

So it seems that in times past, wherever quilts existed so did the custom of exchanging patterns in the form of a fabric block. Now, when you find a box of old, assorted quilt blocks at an auction, flea market or antique shop, you'll know that you have probably stumbled upon a quiltmaker's pattern collection. "Treat it with respect as a textbook of American life."⁴⁷

Notes and References:

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2. Guild of the Needle and Bobbin Crafts, "Old-Time Patchwork and Appliqued Quilts," *Ladies' Home Journal* (January 1922) pp. 31, 102.
3. Clementine Paddleford, *Patchwork Quilts: A Collection of Thirty-seven Old Time Blocks* (New York: Farm and Fireside, no date (circa 1927-8) p. 3.
4. Patsy and Myron Orlofsky, *Quilts in America* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1974) pp. 49, 248.
5. Ruth McKendry, *Traditional Quilts and Bed Coverings* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1979) p. 103.
6. Jonathan Holstein, *The Pieced Quilt: An American Design Tradition* (Boston: New York Graphic Society; Little, Brown and Co., 1973) p. 85.
7. Marie D. Webster, *Quilts: Their Story and How to Make Them* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1915; 1926 edition) p. 135.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
9. Orlofsky and Orlofsky, p. 248.
10. Author's interview with Lillie Webb, Wichita, Kansas, September 20, 1986.
11. Gleanings from quilt block patterns in the collection of the author.
12. McKendry, pp. 100-102.
13. Jeannette Lasansky, *In the Heart of Pennsylvania* (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Oral Traditions Project, 1985) pp. 26-27.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
15. Letter from Gertrude (possibly Mrs. S.N. Frank) and family to Gladys (Mrs. George Browning Dalrymple) and family. Collection of the author.
16. Holstein, p. 85; Linda Otto Lipsett, "A Piece of Ellen's Dress," *Remember Me: Women & Their Friendship Quilts* (San Francisco: The Quilt Digest Press, 1985) p. 80.
17. Ruth E. Finley, *Old Patchwork Quilts and the Women Who Made Them* (Newton Centre, Massachusetts: Charles T. Branford Co., 1929; reprint 1970) p. 37.
18. Webster, pp. 136-139; Orlofsky and Orlofsky, p. 248; Holstein, p. 85; Mary Antoine de Julio, "A Record of a Woman's Work—The Betsey Reynolds Voorhees Collection," *Uncoverings 1982* (Mill Valley, California: American Quilt Study Group, 1983) pp. 77, 81.

19. June 13, 1985, Abilene, Kansas. The author purchased Miss Vanderwilt's extensive collection of quilt patterns (newspaper clippings, etc.) including the sketches. The Vanderwilt family owned a general store in Solomon (near Abilene) for many years.
20. Unpublished research relating to the ancestry of Phillip Gene Smith, collection of the author. 1870 Federal Population Census, Ozark County, Missouri, Bridges Township, Gainesville. Martin Robert Smith was known to have had a general store and was listed in 1870 as a kitchen merchant with real estate valued at \$1,050 and personal property valued at \$1,317. Ozark County, in the heart of the Ozark Mountains of south-central Missouri, was sparsely populated, then as well as now, because of its mountainous terrain.
21. For illustrations of tin quilt patterns, see: Elmer L. Smith, *Tinware: Yesterday and Today* (Lebanon, Pennsylvania: Applied Arts Publishers, 1974; third printing, 1976) pp. 18-19; Jeannette Lasansky, "Form and Decoration in Unpainted Pennsylvania Tinware," Part One, *Spinning Wheel*, Vol. 38, No. 5 (Sept./Oct. 1982) pp. 20-25.
22. For discussions of specific Peddler's Quilts, see: Florence Peto, *American Quilts and Coverlets* (New York: Chanticleer Press, Inc., 1949) p. 40; Bets Ramsey and Merikay Waldvogel, *The Quilts of Tennessee* (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1986) pp. 52-55, photo p. 53.
23. Robert Bishop, William Secord and Judith Reiter Weissman, *Quilts, Coverlets, Rugs & Samplers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982) Plate 266; Joel and Kate Kopp, *American Hooked and Sewn Rugs: Folk Art Underfoot* (New York: E.P. Dutton, Inc., 1985) p. 80.
24. For full discussion, see: Virginia Gunn, "Victorian Silk Template Patchwork in American Periodicals 1850-1875," *Uncoverings 1983* (Mill Valley, California: American Quilt Study Group, 1984) pp. 9-25.
25. "Our Household," *Farm and Fireside* (December 1, 1886) p. 88.
26. Eva M. Niles, "Our Household; Patchwork" (two parts), *Farm and Fireside* (June 1, 1890) p. 292; (June 15, 1890) pp. 308-9.
27. Ronald G. MacDonald, "Paper; History," *The World Book Encyclopedia* (Chicago: Field Enterprises Educational Corp., 1974) Vol. 15; Robert Bray Wingate, "Restoring Old Books," *Early American Life* (December 1977) pp. 36-39.
28. Joseph Gustaitis, "Ottmar Mergenthaler's Wonderful Machine," *American History Illustrated*, Vol. XXI, No. 4 (June 1986) pp. 28-29.
29. "Mail-Order Business," *The World Book Encyclopedia*, Vol. 13; Kenneth Wiggins Porter, "Aaron Montgomery Ward," *Ibid.*, Vol. 21;

- Brian McGinty, "Mr. Sears & Mr. Roebuck," *American History Illustrated*, Vol. XXI, No. 4 (June 1986) pp. 34-37, 48-49.
30. For more information, see: Cuesta Benberry, "An Historic Quilt Document: The Ladies Art Company Catalog," *Quilters' Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer 1978) pp. 13-14.
 31. There were actually 519 because eleven numbers had been discontinued or skipped over.
 32. Calico blocks from 20¢ to \$1.00; silk blocks from 35¢ to \$3.00.
 33. Collection of the author: fourteen Ladies' Art Company catalogs, late 1890s-1930s or 1940s, along with numerous classified advertisements from various magazines.
 34. Classified advertisement, *Farm and Fireside* (November 1, 1891).
 35. Classified advertisement, *Home Magazine* (July 1902).
 36. One example: W.R. Williams, Inventor, Proprietor and Manufacturer of the Perfection Tailor System of Dress Cutting, 1535 Massachusetts Street, Lawrence, Kansas. Covered by six copyrights dating from March 10, 1879 through January 1, 1890. Printed by Journal Print, Lawrence, Kansas. Collection of the author.
 37. Elizabeth Daingerfield, "Kentucky Mountain Patchwork Quilts," *Ladies' Home Journal* (no date, circa 1909). Transfer pattern No. 14170 supplied for 15¢, post-free; "The New Flower Patchwork Quilts; Designs by Marie D. Webster," *Ladies' Home Journal* (January 1912). Transfer pattern No. 14474 supplied for 15¢, post-free.
 38. "Fancy Work for Christmas," *Farmer's Wife* (December 1912).
 39. For further discussion, see: Jinny Beyer, *The Quilter's Album of Blocks & Borders* (McLean, Virginia: EPM Publications, Inc., 1980), Chapter I, "Sources for Quilt Patterns," pp. 3-9.
 40. For a comprehensive discussion of this time period, see: Cuesta Benberry, "The 20th Century's First Quilt Revival," *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine*; Part I: Issue 114 (July/August 1979) pp. 20-22; Part II: Issue 115 (September 1979) pp. 25-26, 29; Part III: Issue 116 (October 1979) pp. 10-11, 37.
 41. Charlotte F. Boldtmann, "Quaint Patterns for Quilts with Diagrams Showing Sizes and Shapes of Patches," *Farm and Fireside* (November 11, 1911).
 42. "Quilt Patterns for Busy Fingers," *Farm and Fireside* (March 16, 1912).
 43. "Quaint Designs in Quilt-Blocks," *Farm and Fireside* (January 4, 1913).
 44. Author's interview with Oma Haines, Wichita, Kansas, September 23, 1986. Oma Belle Pixley Myers Haines (1914-_____). Maternal Grandmother: Sarah Belle Maltby McCain (1869-1938). Paternal Great-Grandmother: Melissa Amanda (?) McCain (circa 1831-1932).

45. Author's interview with Lillie Webb, Wichita, Kansas, September 20, 1986. Lillie Mae Hutcherson Webb (1909-_____). Mother: Elvalena Turner Hutcherson (1870-1943). Maternal Grandmother: Sarah Owens Turner (1851-1923).
46. Author's interview with Pansy Smith, Wichita, Kansas, October 7, 1986. Pansy Ellen Caldwell Smith (1907-_____). Mother: Margaret (Maggie) Ellen Thomas Caldwell (1874-1959). Paternal Grandmother: Minerva L. Childress Caldwell (1856-1933).
47. Hinson, p. 14.

Additional note: Conversations with Bets Ramsey and Sandra Todaro after the presentation of this paper in October 1986 revealed that in the southeastern United States collections of quilt block patterns can be found strung on a thread in the same fashion as a group of buttons or groups of fabric pieces cut in preparation for quilting. They seem to be loosely strung onto the thread and the blocks turn as pages of a book.