



Quilts in the Dowry

Jeannette Lasansky

The dowry, or *aussteier* as it was called by Pennsylvania Germans in the 18th and 19th centuries, was part of a complex inheritance system. Today it still plays an important part in the lives of our Plain people—the Amish and Old Order Mennonites—but is virtually non-existent in our mainstream culture.

The dowry was a centuries-old tradition brought over from Europe and modified here by a “frontier” rural farming culture. Here one’s ability to work and perform tasks was as important, or more important in many instances, than one’s ability to contribute a traditional dowry. Dowries that consisted solely of cash, or cash and land, became the exception and not the rule.

This was particularly true among Pennsylvania Germans. Their dowries or *aussteiers* consisted of household furnishings, farm goods, and tools which were given according to sex-linked spheres of work on the farm. Many domestic goods, garden equipment and some animals were given to females; a few household goods (beds, bedding, and desks) were given to males along with a great amount of farm equipment, animals, grains and some vehicles. *Aussteier* for the Pennsylvania Germans was a pooling of culturally predetermined resources.

Overwhelming evidence (in account books, wills and indentures) shows families’ adherence to the practice of giving their young people “a good start,” “outfittings,” or “advancements,” no matter what their means. Even families, which due to economic hardship had to send their young children away from home, gave them dowries—no matter how minimal—through the terms of contractual arrangements called “indentures.” The

dowries given in indentures included as little as an education in housewifery along with a suit of clothing and some cash to as much as several beds and bedding, a chest, cow, spinning wheel, and more cash at the indenture’s conclusion. On the other hand, families of means were able to more directly provide for their children when they left home. Such families might try to exercise control over their childrens’ decisions through the giving, postponement or denial of the dowry.

Pennsylvania-German families sought to give equal shares (at least within sex groups if not among all children) while some of their English neighbors (particularly the Anglicans) invested primarily or exclusively in the first-born son. (This tradition of primogeniture left the other children to fend for themselves.) At times a final, very small, cash settlements were given to make dowry portions equal. If any preference was shown in the Pennsylvania-German dowry it was exhibited in giving the family farm intact—as much as possible—to the oldest child, a male if there was one. With that legacy often came serious financial obligations to one’s parents and to one’s siblings.

The parcelling out of specific goods to children, whether over time or all at once, was often recorded in what was called “the family book.” Such dowry portions or “advancements” might also appear interspersed amongst other types of personal records (farm ledgers for instance). The result of our work on the historical dowry or *aussteier* in Pennsylvania is based in large part on our search through hundreds of documents (diaries, letters, estate inventories, and indentures). We also did an analysis of “family books” as well as the ledgers of cabinetmakers who often made the dowry furniture: 29 from 1749 to

Color plate. Detail of matching late 19th-century pillowcases and quilt from the Brownsville, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, Collection of Barbara V. Wamelink.



1945 were for primarily Pennsylvania-German, rural farming families while 15 from 1777 to 1877 were for comparable Anglo-American families.

This source was not the only place where there was mention of specific dowry portions. Some marriage contracts and many wills include much dowry information. The latter often stated what the female brought to the marriage as “hers” and also stated what would be her share as a widow. The “dower” or *ausbehalt* was required by Pennsylvania law to be a minimum of one-third of the husband’s estate. In addition, wills often specifically showed what the father intended to give to those children whom he had not yet “outfitted” and what obligations the oldest might have in being the surrogate parent. Most importantly, the wills, with their occasional reference to the “family book” (advancements already made) place the dowry as the starting point in what was a complex and commonly-held inheritance system.

Beds, bedding, and a cow were items common in almost everyone’s dowry—male or female; items considered essential when setting out from the home. The earliest dowry references were often the least specific as to what comprised bedding but we know from the mid-18th- to mid-19th-century estate inventories that there were originally two distinct types: English and Germanic. The latter had a feather bed tradition; the former had quilts.

The family book of prosperous Mennonite farmers who lived in Upper Salford Township, Montgomery County, illustrates the evolution of the bedding given in Pennsylvania-Germanic *aussteiers* from 1749 to 1857 through three generations of the Clemens family. The earliest period of the Clemens records, or those for the first generation (1749-1781), was when the more prosperous as well as culturally receptive Germanic families were coming under “English” influences.

Bedding for all three generations in the Clemens family consisted of the typical Pennsylvania-German bedcases, bolster cases, pillowcases, bedticks, sheets, bed curtains, and feathers for both their low- and high-post beds. A woven coverlet was first recorded in 1781 for Susanna’s *aussteier*. Although she was the only girl of the first generation’s nine to receive one, similar coverlets were given to all three girls and two boys of the second generation (1789-1812) and to four of the five girls and all three males in the third generation (1827-1857). It was not until 1834 that the first and only Clemens child (a girl) was given a quilt—in the “English” tradition.

Like many other Pennsylvania-German families, the Clemens family began to maintain dual bedding types: Germanic featherticks and woven coverlets as well as English

quilts. In the 27 Pennsylvania-German “family books” studied, many gave featherticks until the mid-19th century; their last recorded entry being in 1863. Nancy Roan in her research in the Goschenhoppen region (where Montgomery, Berks and Lehigh counties meet) has noted that even in the early 20th century some Pennsylvania-Germans were still sleeping between two featherticks—a tradition which, as noted by an early New England visitor, tends little to promote sleep or comfort of a stranger” (“Quilting in the Goschenhoppen,” *In the Heart of Pennsylvania Symposium Papers*, Lewisburg, PA., Oral Traditions Project, 1986, p. 48)."

The quilt given to the Clemens child of the third generation was the second quilt noted in a Pennsylvania-German family book. The first was given by Michael Albrecht to his daughter, Salome, in 1831. Albrecht, who lived in New Hanover Township, Montgomery County, was a weaver by trade. The fact that all of his daughters got “bedquilts and accessories” (see color plate) in addition to the more traditional woven coverlets, illustrates the fact that Pennsylvania Germans (even the children of coverlet weavers!) were beginning to maintain dual bedding traditions. Nancy Roan has cited another weaver, John Tyson of Perkiomen Township, Montgomery County, as leaving a bed quilt in his estate inventory as early as 1823. According to Ellen Gehret, and Alan G. Keyser in their *Homespun Textile Traditions of the Pennsylvania Germans* (Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1976) this switch to quilts was in part a consequence of the new abundance of “cheap cotton goods” starting about that time.

Also noted by Alan G. Keyser and Ellen Gehret, in further research in hundreds of Pennsylvania-German estate inventories in Montgomery County, the earliest known inventory reference to a quilt is 1788. Presently, the earliest known extant Pennsylvania-German quilt is dated “1804” and made by or for Mary Sites of Northampton County.

After the Clemenses’ and Albrechts’ mention of quilts, other references to quilts appeared sporadically in the Pennsylvania-German family books—always listed along with traditional Germanic feather ticks and woven coverlets: Berks Countian Jacob Leiby gave a quilting frame and four quilting screws in the 1860s to his daughter Esther; Erastus Rhoads of Unionville, Lehigh County, gave his daughter Alice seven yards of muslin for pillowcases at 30 cents a yard, 18 yards of quilt calico at 20 cents a yard, 24 bales of cotton at ten cents a bale, 24 yards of calico for comforts at 11 cents a yard as well as a finished “fine quilt” at \$12 (by way of contrast Alice also got a white coverlet at \$6.50 and linen table-

cloth at \$3.37½). On the other hand, Alice Rhoads's sister Sabrina, who wanted only coverlets, received one colored and one white at \$4.40 each. In this same time period (1860s), Henry Dietz, a farmer in York County, paid \$2.00 for the "peasing" [sic] of a quilt and 37F(1,2) cents for the "soeing" [sic] of a quilt for a daughter's *aussteier*.

In 1869, Peter Zimmerman, a Mennonite who farmed in Earl Township, Lancaster County, gave these particular bedding types to his daughter Elizabeth: two blankets (\$8), two homemade blankets (\$6.25), two coverlets (\$10), five chaff bags—three of which were homemade (\$9), five bolsters—three of which were homemade (\$1.80), ten sheets (\$8), 35 yards of bedticking (\$10.85), 38 yards of bed check (\$9.50), one comfort (\$2.50), one comfort with wool (\$3.50), 40½ pounds of feathers (\$36.66), a counterpane (\$4.75), and seven quilts (\$21). Another daughter, Anna, received similar bedding in 1878: feathers, a wool coverlet, half of a coverlet, four blankets, two comforts, and again, seven quilts; the *aussteier* for Lydia in 1881 was nearly identical. Her white quilt (\$1.90) as well as her wool coverlet (\$7.50) and half-wool coverlet (\$4.25) was purchased at Philip Schunn, Son and Co. in Lancaster, while her two other comforts, seven quilts, ten sheets, five bolsters, and four chaff bags came from R. Culbertson's.

The few and scantily described "English" family books deceptively yielded only one quilt reference. Their estate inventories, on the other hand, demonstrated that quilts had always been a major bedding component—in America as well as in the British Isles. English-born Jasper Yeats of Lancaster noted in his account book that he gave his daughter Mary (b. 1770) a campbed, a field bedstead, a curtain and counterpane as well as "yards of calico for the campbed" in 1791. He later paid one pound and two shillings for the fringe and binding of a quilt for another daughter Elizabeth (b. 1778).

The Pennsylvania Germans were slow to embrace the "English" quilting tradition but then dominated the scene, at least in the contemporary public's mind. Among the Pennsylvania Germans, it was the Amish, the most conservative of the Anabaptist groups, who adopted quilt tradition even more slowly and whose work is considered by some to be pre-eminent today. As Eve Wheatcroft Granick observes in her book, *The Amish Quilts* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1989), the Amish not surprisingly maintained bedding traditions quite similar to other Pennsylvania-German households but their bedding traditions changed even more slowly. Initially, they too had preference for home-produced linen. Their feather ticks also were slowly replaced

by or used in conjunction with blankets and woven coverlets, later haps (1836), as the dominant bedding types. Haps, also called "comforts" or "comfortables," are a type of pieced quilt. They are often made of heavier, coarser material than other quilts, filled with a very thick wool batting and most often knotted or tied to a lining although sometimes they were quilted.

Quilts—as distinct from haps—were not mentioned with any frequency in Amish estate inventories until the 1880s, nearly 50 years later than other, neighboring Pennsylvania-Germanic groups. Granick observed that there are less than two dozen known pre-1880 Amish quilts extant anywhere (p. 32). The first quilt mentioned in an Amish estate inventory is that in the 1831 inventory of Abraham Kurtz (Wayne County, Ohio) followed by one in the 1836 inventory of John Hartzler (Mifflin County, Pennsylvania). Others appeared sporadically in 1847 and 1849. They began to appear with some frequency in the 1850s and 1860s inventories of Mifflin County (pp. 25-26).

Several dozen of the Amish informants we interviewed in Lancaster, Mifflin, Centre, and Clinton counties, affirm that the quilt, and its



Figure 1. Dowry chest and textiles of and by Harriet Hull Pensyl b. 1838 d. 1898 Elysburg, Northumberland County. / Pieced and appliquéd solid colored and calico fabrics with some padded work on white tops with plain backs. Applied solid colored binding; front turned to back as edge treatment. (right) 86" × 87" and (left) 79" square with 7-9 and 7-8 stitches per inch. / Collection of John and Melodie Persing; Amos and Corine Persing.

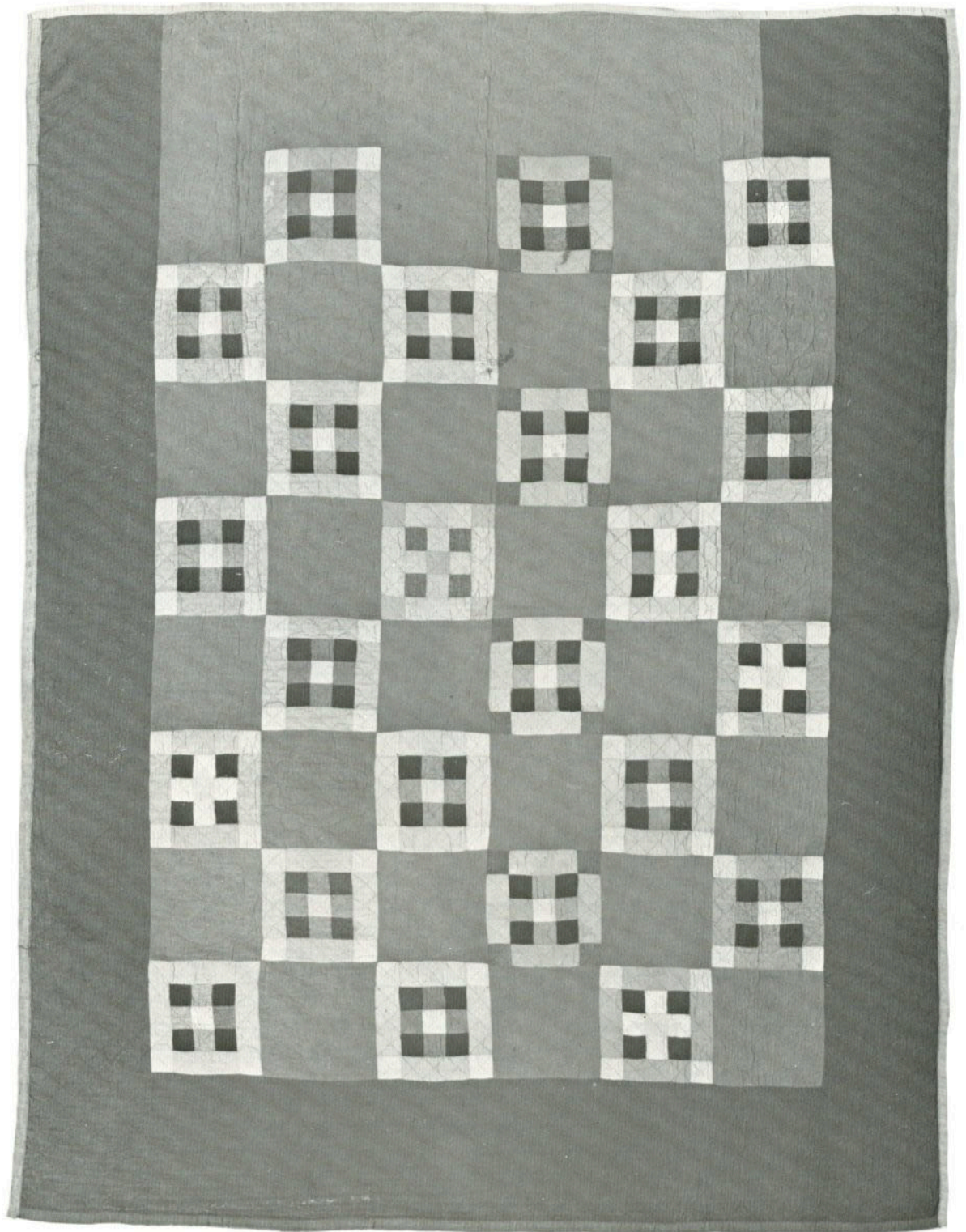


Figure 2. Nebraska Amish quilt from Mifflin County c.1920. / Pieced cotton and cotton rayons with applied cotton binding. 70¼" × 54¼" with 8-10 stitches per inch. / Private collection.

cousin the hap or comfort, is the bedding of choice given as *aussteier* today to both young males and females and in sufficient quantity to cover the number of beds they receive. Amish quilts, appearing at local auctions with family provenance, frequently have this *aussteier* or dowry association intact. It is among the Plain people that the *aussteier* is maintained in the same manner as that of their Pennsylvania-German forebears.

As I noted in *A Good Start/The Aussteier or Dowry* (Lewisburg, PA: Oral Traditions, 1990), Sarah, or "Sadie," and her husband, Joseph Beiler, live alone in the "grossdawdi" part of the house on the Beiler farm in Lancaster County where he was born and which he, as the only son, bought from his parents. When we visited, it was Mr. Beiler's 66th birthday (May 12, 1989) and Sadie commented that he still would like to move else-

where, but she described herself as “an old post” who would just as soon stay where she is.

When asked whether the family ever kept records of what they gave their children before or at the time of marriage, she responded, “No, we never did.” Sadie stressed that she was not sure what was the custom in other Amish families but that the Beilers tried to do for their children what their parents had done for them. There were no rules but everybody is guided by tradition, so that she felt certain “patterns” evolved. They never worried what their neighbors gave their children because everybody had different financial means. It is just that everybody will “stretch” themselves (*na da deck schtrecker*) to do the best they can. But, she observed, young people often compare what each “gets from home.”

Sadie and Joe Beiler have eight daughters. The oldest, Rachel, was married in 1968; the youngest, Liddy, in 1986. The Beilers tried to give equally to each, that is in items not in dollar amounts. The latter would be impossible because of inflation over the eighteen-year period—the cost of food alone for the weddings had tripled between the first and the last wedding. Their daughters’ *aussteier* included a bedroom suite plus two beds and a supply of bedding including two topmost coverings for each bed, usually a quilt and a “spread.” When Sadie married, spreads were more popular because they could be washed, whereas quilts could not. She felt that today quilts are “in” partially because spreads are too expensive. Sadie made quilts for her daughters and is trying to make a quilt top for each of her forty-two grandchildren to be given to them on their eighteenth birthdays.

Hannah Stoltzfoos, the third youngest of twelve children and the mother of three, lives on a Lancaster County farm with her husband, Amos, a son and daughter-in-law and their young family. The two women share the formal parlor because what might serve as Hannah’s is used as a small shop for locally made quilts and small handsewn items. Our visit there began with her showing her own *aussteier* quilts and one of her father’s. Hannah’s mother made one light and one dark quilt for each of her surviving seven children. The light one is white with colored embroidery and is smaller, intended to be used with “fancy pillows.” They had been put in Hannah’s hope chest.

This “hope” or blanket chest was the second piece of furniture she had received and in it she accumulated, as do other females, the larger and heavier pieces of bedding of the *aussteier*. (The male’s heavy bedding, like quilts, just “gets put somewhere.”) Her first piece of furniture had been given several years

earlier—a chest of drawers. In it, Hannah had accumulated the smaller pieces of bedding: Pillowcases and sheets plus towels, tablecloths, and handkerchiefs. Small area rugs—braided or sewn—might be placed there also. Sometimes these pieces of furniture are made by a “handy” father but she laughed saying “if that had been the case with me, my hope chest would have more resembled a wood box.” The order of receiving these two “female” furniture items, at either Christmas or birthdays from about age fifteen to nineteen, is a fairly uniform “pattern,” as is the kind of items stored in them.

Hannah’s dark quilt was made for her in 1936 and is in the “Sunshine and Shadow” pattern. It is made of small crepe blocks (the same material as used in her wedding dress) and was made by Hannah’s mother when Hannah was seventeen or eighteen. (Hannah did some quilting work on it but it was her mother who conceived and organized the project, hence she says that her mother made it.) She also had one of their father’s *aussteier* quilts in the “Diamond in the Square” pattern. One of Hannah’s sons who is particularly interested in family history will get this.

She feels that males traditionally get two quilts or spreads and females get three, numbers that were mentioned by others. These would correspond to the numbers of beds brought to the new household by each of the young people, male and female. Hannah said most parents try to give the boy two beds—one of which will be used by a hired hand, one for a guest—while the girl gets the same two beds plus the bed of the suite.

Textiles are given to both young men and women throughout their lives and those not to be used immediately are stored in the girl’s bureau or chest of drawers and later hope chest, and in the young male’s desk drawers. When shopping a mother is often asked: “Is it for the drawers?” The textiles include not only several sets of changes for each bed, but also towels, tablecloths, and small articles of clothing.

Hannah Stoltzfoos mentioned that women were often given a yard of cloth from each friend or relative at the time of a child’s birth. For a while that amount would suffice for the child’s clothes but later the amount would be insufficient. At that time, a woman might save material or “pile it up” for the child’s *aussteier* quilt—often a “Sunshine and Shadow” pattern which would well utilize yardage as well as scraps. She confirmed Amish young peoples’ current requests for quilts rather than store-bought spreads, though the latter were sometimes used on beds where the topmost covering would get a lot of wear and need much laundering. Hence the *aussteier* quilts were often used in the guest room. Nowadays,

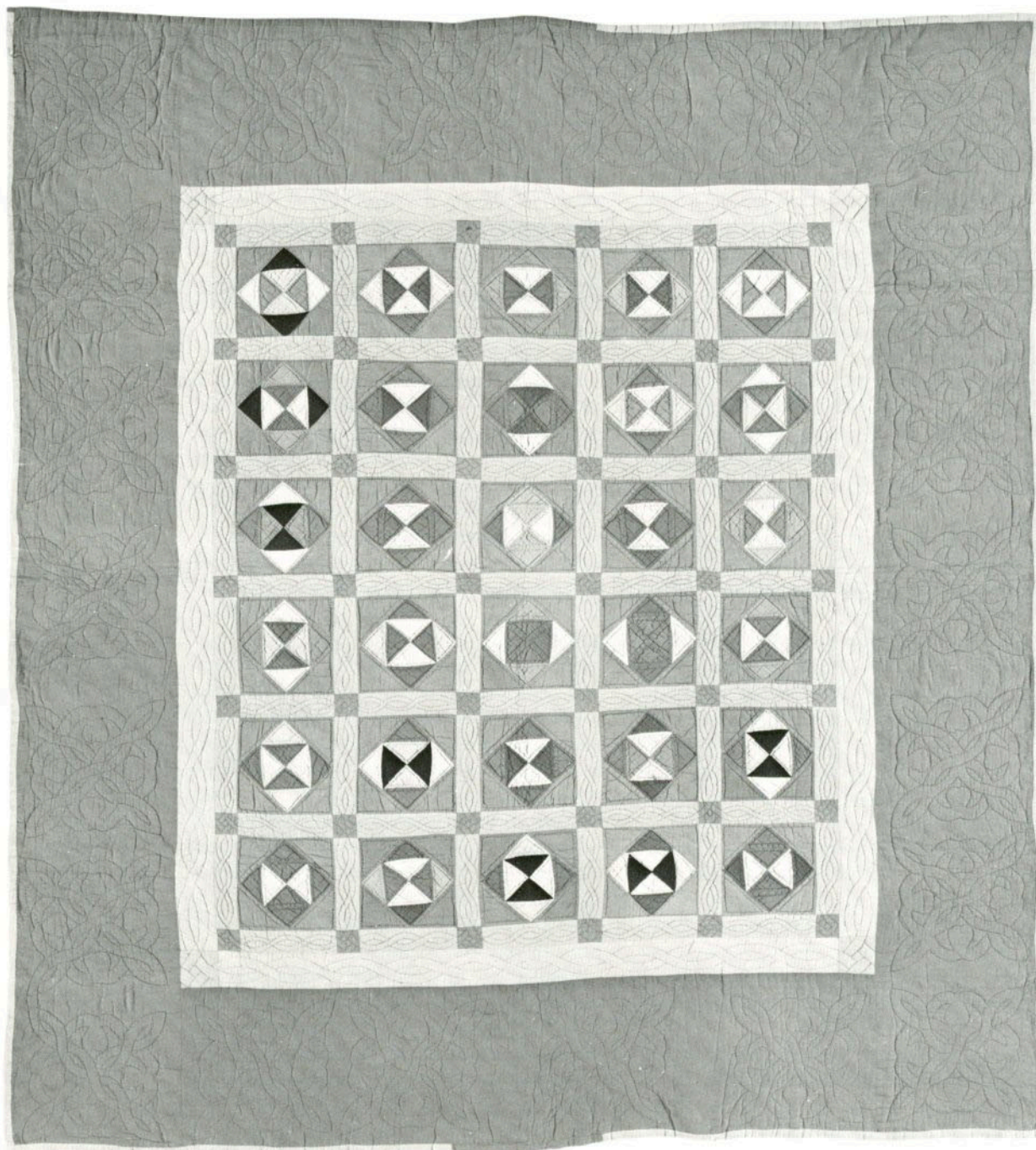


Figure 3. Quilt from Mifflin County c.1940. / Pieced cottons and cotton rayons. Cotton back turned to front as edge treatment. / 84" × 77" with 7-9 stitches per inch. / Private collection.

she said, of course they can be washed where previously airing was more common and sometimes the exclusive way of cleaning. "Air cleans them and saves the colors," and like her mother, Hannah feels it is best done on a "windy raw damp day to freeze the germs and bugs out."

In contrast to our work among the Old Order Amish, where informants told of consistently getting from two to three *aussteier* quilts each, Ms. Granick found a greater range in the number given (from none to ten, with females usually getting more than the males of the same family). We did find that among the most conservative Amish—the Nebraska or "white tops" some children get as

many as seven quilts. Some get as few as one, but most about three along with some comforts or haps. Pieced quilts, and many of them, seem to be preferred bedding among the "white tops"—there are no spreads or embroidered work in these homes. Instead of the Lancaster Amish needlework chair pads, often worked in almost iridescent shades of wool, the Nebraska Amish have pieced (but not quilted) chair seats and back pads in their clothing fabrics—blues, purples and browns being dominant. The nine patch and its variations are favorite patterns. Window covers or loose hanging panels are also made in these fabrics in contrast to the others' store-bought green shades.

"Patterns of giving" play the dominant role in these Nebraska Amish families, also. As Franey Hostettler noted in *A Good Start, The Aussteier or Dowry*, some people give the boys a desk, but "my husband had to make his own, so our [two] boys have to make theirs." A desk is an essential piece for them to have to keep their records in and books on top. Similarly with the female's corner cupboard she said, "I had to get my own so my [three] girls have to get their own." Tradition is paramount in her mind.

Franey, like other Amish women we interviewed, Mary Beiler, Barbara and Anna Fisher, mentions her mother as having kept a record of all these things—in a book, on a tablet, or on "a paper." Franey's mother had seven girls and with all that was required for "setting up a household" for the girls, she remembers her mother recording what the first girls got and trying to do the same for the others—to give equal value; "boys are simple (i.e. fewer items)."

Before leaving, Franey's youngest daughter, Leah, brought out her recent attempts at counted cross-stitch needlework. Embroidery is done to a much lesser extent by the Nebraska Amish than others but her new sewing skills will be used as she simply initials and maybe dates her bedding textiles or makes a door towel. Leah, like her mother, will in time learn to make quilts. If she becomes a mother she will make perhaps three or four quilts as well as knot several comforts or haps for each of her children. These will be the *aussteier* quilts of tomorrow.

While the evidence is clear that quilts were given and made for Pennsylvania's dowries for over two centuries, what constitutes a dowry quilt and how many were considered necessary, is less so.

Ruth E. Finley, in her classic *Old Patchwork Quilts and the Women Who Make Them* (New York, 1929) may be the first to have written that 13 quilts were the requisite number for one's dowry: "The dower chest of the old-time bride was supposed to contain at least a 'baker's dozen' of quilts. Twelve of these were fashioned with a view to everyday use; the thirteenth was a 'bride's quilt,' a *pièce de résistance* so elaborate of design in both pattern and quilting that it was to all intents and purposes a counterpane. The bride's quilt was planned and executed only after a girl was definitely engaged (p. 36)." While Finley's work relied heavily upon interviews, it is unclear on what this statement is based.

The number of 13 dowry quilts has, until recently, been mentioned repeatedly as fact. Our interviews as well as others' like Eve Granick's or the Lancaster "Quilt Harvest's" reveals no single magic number—be it four or 13. Quite the contrary, oral evidence given by

quiltmakers working early in this century, confirms suspicions that the number of dowry quilts varied greatly and still does. As Harriet Knorr of Berwick noted, she enjoyed sewing like her role models, her grandmother and mother and had about seven put aside, but her sister did not like sewing and had only one quilt in her hope chest. Ninety-one-year-old Harriet Knorr was still piecing and quilting with "twenty-five on the way (*Pieced by Mother*, Lewisburg, PA: Oral Traditions Project, 1987, p. 25)." Harriet's dowry quilts included her perennial favorites like a patch on patch, a nine patch, a four square, a basket, a log cabin, two crazy comforts but no appliques.

Appliques have often been assigned by Finley and others in the role of best quilt or "bride's quilt". In our oral interviews we found a great range of criteria and pattern in assigning "best." The following quilts are just a few of those known to be quilts set aside for "a good start."

Jeannette Lasansky is the director of the Oral Traditions Project and a lecturer at Bucknell University. She has conceived of, researched, and authored a series of monographs on Pennsylvania craft traditions: stoneware pottery, basketry, redware pottery, forged iron work, plain tin, quilting, and the dowry. Her work over the past 18 years has been supported by grants from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the Early American Industries Association, and the National Endowment for the Arts and her work has received state and national awards from the American Association for State and Local History, the Historical Foundation of Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies, the American Institute of Graphic Arts, and the Communication Arts. She has guest curated major exhibitions of this material culture at the State Museum in Harrisburg, the Hershey Museum of American Life, the Heritage Center of Lancaster County, and Bucknell University and lectured at places such as the Smithsonian, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Winterthur, the Museum of American Folk Art and the Pennsylvania Farm Museum. Jeannette has organized four national quilt symposia, the next one to be held at Franklin and Marshall College in 1993. In 1985 she organized and executed a large fieldwork project on contemporary traditional quilting in New Mexico for the Museum of International Folk Art, and has been a consultant for the Lancaster County quilt documentation as well as for statewide efforts in Ohio and Oregon. She has written the technical guide on the planning and execution of a quilt documentation project for the American Quilt Study Group. Jeannette has published extensively in The Magazine Antiques and also in the European folklife magazine Volkskunst among others. She has served on the crafts panel of the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, on numerous grant review committees, and on the Pennsylvania Folklife Advisory Committee which she chaired (1984-86).

