

We tend to think of Mexican-Americans as immigrants but Southwestern history tells another story. We discover that people from Spain and Mexico lived in what is now United States well before anyone else but the Native Americans.

From Looking for Gold to Shepherders in Need of Grassland

It all began with Coronado looking for gold in 1540. By the 17th century there were settlements in what is now New Mexico. Many were herders of the churro sheep that provided both food and wool for weaving of blankets and other textiles that the settlers used for home and trade.



As you can see, the Spanish people living in the area that is now New Mexico were rooted in production of textiles. Although the early women did not do any quilting they had a rich tradition of needlework. By the 18th century the more affluent women were able to obtain fine fabric for their needlework but other women were not to be left out. They embroidered flowers, leaves and birds on wool.

Pioneer Women Introduce Quilt Making

We don't know exactly when the first pioneer woman introduced her quilting to the Spanish American settlers but star quilt patterns became an element of Spanish American women's weaving quite early. Once the railroad arrived in the late 1800s fabric became more available even to poorer women.

Women found that they could make warm bedcoverings much faster than weaving by sewing together scraps of fabric with an old blanket, wool or cotton as filling. Sometimes these quilts were pieced on both front and back as the purpose was to use available cloth to create warmth. Whatever was at hand was used.

The Need For Warm Bedding in New Mexico's High Country

Blankets and quilts were much needed as many of the Mexican-American people lived in the high northern part of New Mexico. With their background of weaving they often pieced strips of fabric for their quilts. In such a cold environment nothing could be wasted. Quilt Historian, Dorothy Zopf, explains that, "as they dress their churches with a new coat of mud plaster each year, so new covers, not new quilts, are made to prolong the life of an older quilt or an even old serape." ¹



Both ranch and agricultural workers needed bedding when they were working in the outdoors. Bedrolls were made of 4 or 5 quilts to keep these men warm on those cold nights that occur at high elevations.

Quilts For Warmth - Embroidery For Decorative Bedcoverings

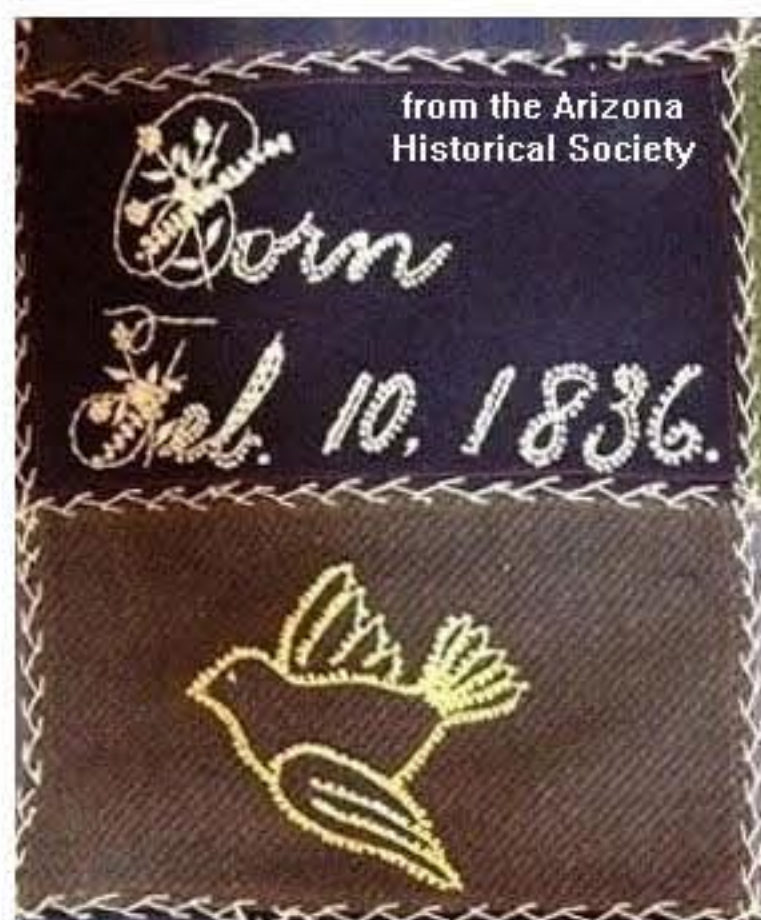
In the old days when you walked into a home you may not have seen any quilts at all. They were considered utilitarian objects not decorative. These quilts had heavy filling and were difficult to wash. Instead beds were covered with a homemade bedspread or a sheet.

One woman recalled, "A lot of people embroidered sheets and used that for a bedspread. I can remember a lot of them, seeing them on people's beds — a huge peacock—things like that were embroidered on a sheet and they cover the bed with the sheet in the daytime." ²

Needlework and Quilting Combine in Regional Quilts

In other southwestern areas quilting was introduced as well. In Texas women brought their Spanish needlework skills with them. Quilts of bright colored patches were embroidered with designs popular in Spain and Mexico. Remember that this area was originally a part of Mexico. ³

By the nineteenth century many more women had moved into the southwest from the east. Mexican-Americans who could afford the leisure time made decorative quilts influenced by eastern quilt making techniques.



Manuela Soso McKenna's quilt pictured to the left is a great example of her blending her Mexican needlework heritage with blocks of wool. When she was a child her family had moved from Mexico to Arizona where she later married McKenna. When she made this quilt around 1890 she included names and birthdates of her family in intricate embroidery. Even the embroidery in the birds gives them a feathered look. It appears that the quilt might have been made to be hung rather than used on a bed.

Tucson born Atanacia Santa Cruz Hughes, the wife of an Anglo-American settler, made a stunning pineapple quilt of silk in 1884. It is a wonderful blending of cultures as she used her fine needlework skills to embellish the quilt with flowers, Mexican symbols and

Spanish words. ⁴

From Traditional Anglo-American to Unfettered Mexican-American Quilts

As time went by more and more Mexican-American women made the more formalized quilts that their Anglo-American neighbors were making. Some made both what they considered "old way quilts" and quilts for show.

In her book, *Surviving the Winter*, Dorothy Zoff reports on her extensive study of quilts in New Mexico. She traveled throughout New Mexico interviewing quilters and examining their quilts. She wrote, "What has become clear, is that an Anglo/Eastern U.S. tradition dictated rules that are absent in the quilts made by Hispanic people. Their quilts appear more unfettered, experimental, and pragmatic. With time these distinctions have begun to fade." ⁵

Zoff found that Mexican-American quilts were more often tied than quilted. She points out that the Mexican love of pattern and color results in cheerful quilts that would almost obliterate fine quilting. Dark and light contrasts were popular. Some of these quilts were made of squares and rectangles in informal arrangements. Appliquéd quilts of butterflies and flowers were often of the maker's design. Because most quilts were tied the weight of the fabric could be more varied. Old denim jeans made hardy work quilts. The quilts were filled with cotton, wool or even rags instead of manufactured batting.

As has been mentioned earlier the differences between Anglo-American and Mexican-American quilts have faded over the years. Yet I can't help but think the bright, joyfully colored quilts that we see today might in some way be influenced by the old Mexican love of color.

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References:

¹ p18 "[Surviving the Winter: The Evolution of Quiltmaking in New Mexico](#)", by Dorothy R. Zoff

² p111 "[Southwestern Quilts and Quiltmakers in Context](#)", by Jeannette Lasansky, Uncoverings 1993

⁴ p7 "[Grand Endeavors: Vintage Arizona Quilts and Their Makers](#)", by Pam Knight Stevenson