



Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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QUILTS AND QUILTING

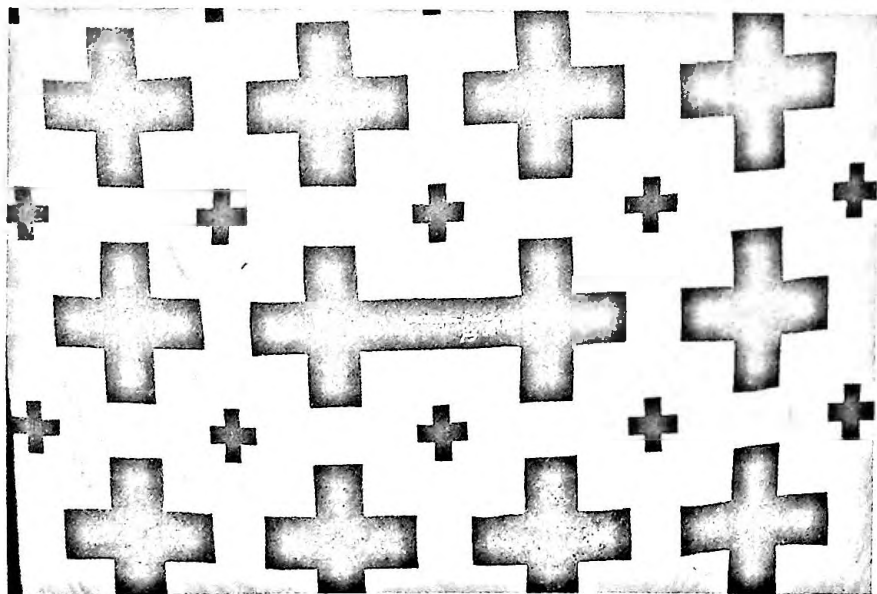
by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

Although quilting reached the height of popularity and artistry on the American prairie in the mid and late 1880's, it had been used hundreds of years ago in Asia for clothing to provide warmth for the wealthy or for armorial protection in battle. Quilting eventually moved to Europe and to Britain, and the process was adapted to the making of bedcovers. When the first settlers came to America, they brought in their trunks "quilted bedcovers," by 1800 "quilt" was the accepted word for such bedcovers.

It was in the last half of the 19th century that quilting became a folk art and a symbol of the American frontier. The quilter's craft, whether pieced, appliqued, or embroidered, was a way of expressing creativity, and the quilting bee was an opportunity to visit and exchange news and gossip for the lonely prairie women.

The quilts of early Americans were made for a very practical reason—to provide warmth. Sizes differed according to their use. Some in the very early frontier days were

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This quilt was made in 1918 by Mrs. George Raffety of Kearney and was given to the Red Cross to be raffled off for World War I fund-raising. One block was sent to Washington requesting President Wilson's signature, and Mrs. Raffety embroidered over the signatures and date: "Edith Bolling Wilson - Woodrow Wilson, July 1918."

The quilt was won by George Raffety, the quilter's husband, according to their son, George Raffety, Jr., who now has the quilt.

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Membership is open to anyone who has an interest in the history of Buffalo County and its people. Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

Basic Membership	\$10.00
Institutional Membership	\$15.00
Supporting Membership	\$25.00

Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual; \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly.

Officers and Directors: President, Jim Cudaback; Vice-President, Philip S. Holmgren; Secretary, Alice Howell; Treasurer, Susan McFerrin. Directors: Frances Link, Barb Avery, Viola Livingston, Michael Stauffer, Glen Wisch, Chad Anderson, Merlin Burglund, Elmer Holzrichter, and past president Margaret Hohnholt. Publications Chairman: Alice Howell.

Trails & Rails Museum 706 West 11th Street (308) 234-3041

WITH THE SOCIETY

September 16. Mark this day on your calendar for the annual September Fun Day at Trails & Rails Museum, beginning at 1:00 p.m. The Buffalo Ringers and the historical society are cosponsoring a horseshoe tournament on the museum grounds. Anyone is welcome to enter. For further information on the tournament call Merlin Burglund, 237-3007. Watch the newspapers for more information on this September event.

President Jim Cudaback has named the Chairmen of Buffalo County Historical committees for 1990-91, as follows:

Bylaws	Margaret Hohnholt	Archives	Viola Livingston
Program	Philip S. Holmgren	Memorials	Francis Link
Personnel	Margaret Hohnholt	Tours	Henry Hohnholt
Membership	Francis Link	Use of the Church	Merlin Burglund
Budget	Philip S. Holmgren	Christmas Walk	Margaret Hohnholt
Building & Grounds	Mike Stauffer	Train Decoration	Chan Lynch III
Long Range Planning	Alice Howell	September Fun Day	Susan McFerrin
Museum Displays	Barb Avery	Wagons West	Chan Lynch III
Publications	Alice Howell	Publicity	Margaret Hohnholt & Margaret Clark

The number of visitors at Trails & Rails Museum is up this summer with the peak on the cancelled Wagons West day when over 125 signed the register. 37 states and six foreign countries have been represented in our summer visitors. The special display of quilts will continue through August.

Mardi Anderson of Kearney, former director of the Trails & Rails Museum, has been nominated for the Board of Directors of the Nebraska State Historical Society from this area. Ballots will be mailed to NSHS members by September 6.

The Buffalo County Historical Society was again a part of the Kearney Art Festival on July 6, 7, 8. A walking tour was offered covering Avenue A, First Avenue, and side streets off Central Avenue. A brochure covering the points of interest is available at Trails & Rails Museum for \$1.25.

Wood River Center, the Wagons West play was given two nights at the Harmon Park Sonatorium, a joint presentation by the historical society and Kearney Community Theatre. Thanks to director Jim Williamson, cast members and musicians.

Next year the Wagons West play will feature Nebraska Centre and the settlement of Gibbon. Amateur or "would be" actors and musicians are invited to take part. Contact Susan McFerrin or Alice Howell.

wider than long for in bitter cold weather as many people as possible slept in one bed for warmth. Quilts with two large notches at one end were for 4-poster beds. Most quilts were of a size to be used on double, single or youth beds, for warmth and for every day use. However, a larger size of a more colorful and intricate design might be used as a bedspread in the "spare" bedroom.

The earliest quilts were the "pieced" ones, and the crazy-quilt was the first of these. The original crazy-quilt was strictly utilitarian, with material of many sizes and shapes in many colors sewn together to create a hodge-podge pattern. It was made of whatever material the housewife might have on hand. The irregular blocks were often outlined in a feather-stitch embroidery to add a touch of attractiveness. Later it developed into a style of its own, always practical, but made from finer materials such as silk and velvet, and enhanced with embroidery on the blocks as well as the outline around each block. It was a quilt for special occasion use.

The thrifty prairie housewife had to make clothing for her family in her home. Scraps of left-over material were cut out, sewn together and used for piecing the quilt block. Blocks for the pieced quilt were of a pattern and color choice of the housewife. It is interesting to note that many quilt patterns reflect the objects of every-day living for which the women had great affection. Flowers, the rose especially, were always a favorite subject. Perhaps the housewife chose flowers because she liked to see a bouquet of color on her beds during the seasons when her garden had no color. Star and sun patterns were also great favorites.

Pioneer farm women might choose a pattern based on their real-life experiences, such as Log Cabin, Barn Raising, Windmill Blades and Courthouse Steps. Although women could not vote some of their patterns reflected the politics of the day—Burgoyne's Surrender, Whig's Defeat, Kansas Troubles, or Lincoln's Platform.

Bride's quilts have always been popular. Favorite patterns are the wedding ring and the double wedding ring. The quilting itself on a bride's quilt was often done with entwining hearts motif. Sometimes friends or family of a bride would give an album quilt, with each woman who created a block signing and dating her block so that the finished quilt was a sort of memory album. Memory quilts are often given on the occasion of an anniversary celebration, also. Another special occasion quilt is the Freedom quilt,



"Embroidered Crazy" is the name of this four-generation family quilt belonging to Eileen Paine of Kearney. Made by her great grandmother, Catherine Middleton Johnson. It was given to her son, who passed it down to his eldest daughter, and she, in turn, gave it to her eldest, Mrs. Paine. The Johnson's homesteaded near Albion, Nebraska in 1875.

given to a young man when he reaches his 21st birthday.

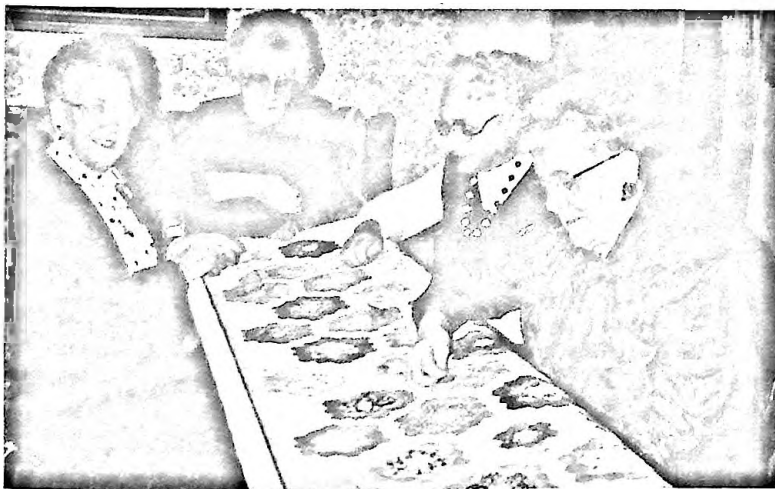
Appliqued quilts, sometimes a pattern in each block, sometimes a design covering the entire quilt top, gave the housewife other choices in quilt making. The appliqued and embroidered quilts were not often used for every day, but were saved for special purposes.

After the quilt top was completed, the lining chosen, and the batting (usually cotton or wool in earlier days) smoothed into place between the top and the lining, the quilt was ready for the quilting frames, the quilting pattern was marked, and it was time for a quilting bee. In early days on the prairie, a quilting bee was an all-day affair. Women had to travel longer distances, travel was slow. To be invited to a day of quilting was indeed a special occasion—far more refined and genteel than gathering for apple paring, cornhusking or threshing bees. It was one of the few occasions where she could wear her "Sunday best" clothes. With thimbles, favorite needles and sewing glasses, if needed, the quilters arrived ready for the job at hand. Seated around the quilt frame, they sewed in tiny, even stitches along the quilt pattern and through all the layers of fabric. And as they sewed, they visited, shared news of the neighbors, the births, deaths and marriages, discussed recipes, child care and politics. At noon the hostess served a big dinner, using her best linen and china. When the meal was over and the dishes washed, the women went back to their quilting.

In later years, in a more settled community and with easier modes of transportation, quilting bees were most apt to be afternoon affairs, with a lunch served to the quilters as well as to the children who gathered after school to ride home with their mothers. Marlene Plambeck, of Kearney, who has many quilts made by her aunts and grandmothers, relates her experience as a schoolgirl:

After school on Wednesdays I was to check in with Grandma in the Presbyterian Church basement in Valentine, Nebraska. My job when I arrived was to cut quilting thread in pieces 18 to 20 inches long and keep four or five needles threaded for these ladies. Only now, nearly 40 years later, do I fully realize the value of this small service I provided.

For her services she was allowed to make a few stitches on the quilt, "but only on the edge."



Quilting at Midway Kensington. Seated, left to right: May Sear, VerJean Hubbert, Lorena Peterson and Grace Asay. Quilt pattern is "Flower Garden."

Quilts and quilting have interested the women of Buffalo County since the county was formed in 1870. Trunks in the covered wagons or railroad cars that brought early settlers to this area contained many a quilt that is still treasured by third and fourth generation descendants. Neighborhood clubs and church women's societies have made quilts ever since clubs and ladies' aid societies have been organized—some for friends and family, some for mission work, some for special occasions in the community, and some to be auctioned for fund-raising. Often these groups, for a price, have done only the quilting on a quilt pieced and put together by another. There are probably few churches or longtime extension clubs whose history of women's work did not include quilting.

Quilters have always had to choose between the sociability of quilting with others or the pride of doing the entire project herself. Only the quilt that is made from start to finish can be entered in the county fairs. The Buffalo County Fair has always had a place for quilts in the fancywork division of the women's exhibits.

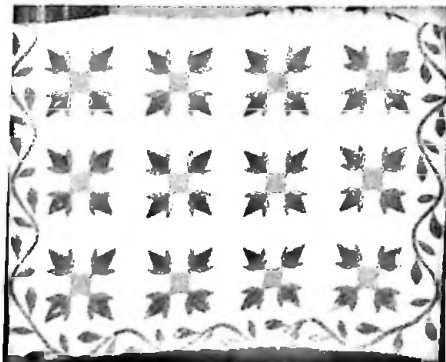
A problem that group quilters have had to put up with is the poor quilter. Her stitches might sometimes be surreptitiously removed and done over, or she might be delegated to take care of the coffee-making or some similar task incident to the quilting project. One quilting group in the county has solved this by asking each quilter to sit in a different place each session so that the good and the bad stitching will be mixed and scattered on the quilt, and, hopefully, not noticed.

Green Hill Kensington was organized July 15, 1915, and is an active club to this day. Mrs. Ruth Anderson has written a history of the club, one of the oldest clubs, if not the oldest, for rural women in Buffalo County. She says, "Those first years we went to Kensington by team and surrey, horse and buggy, team and lumber wagon, or on foot if not too far." By 1925 all were driving cars—when the roads were good. However, many a winter, heavy snows blocked the road but this did not keep Green Hill women from going to Kensington, again in lumber wagons but not on the roads, travelling instead through fields and pastures and along ridges to the home of the hostess.

"The chief purpose of the club," continues Mrs. Anderson, "has been to promote neighborliness. The abiding interest and activity has been quilts and quilting."

In 1925 the club included Extension lessons at their meetings, helped organize the PTA in 1928, served lunch at farm sales, "but before, after and even during the digression into project work, the Kensington had its own quilt projects." These included a friendship quilt for each member, quilts for farewell gifts, quilts for brides-to-be in the neighborhood and for Green Hill school teachers, and even quilts for P.T.A. fund raising. "We can't get away from it—Quilts," and "Almost every meeting seems to be quilts or quilting," stated Mrs. Anderson. Mrs. John Smith was the first

Leroy Walker of Gibbon is the owner of this four-generation quilt, made in 1853 by his great grandmother, Margaret T. Adams, in Pennsylvania. It was brought to Gibbon in 1883 when she visited her daughter, Mrs. J. M. Bayley, grandmother of Mr. Walker. The name of the pattern is unknown. Predominant colors are green and pink, which were popular colors of Pennsylvania quilts of that era.



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president of Green Hill Kensington.

Midway Kensington also made quilt tops and quilted them for new brides in the community, and later did quilting for other people. This club was organized in 1929 for women in the Midway School District north of Odessa. Mrs. Farris Hubbert was its first president.

Sharon Club of rural Gibbon in 1929 or 1930 decided on a quilt project for its members. Each of its thirty members chose a quilt pattern, and each member made a quilt block for each other member. Mrs. Sadie Lavington's quilt from that project is on display at the Gibbon Heritage Center. It is a basket pattern.

Quilts were often family projects. A youth bed quilt at the Gibbon Heritage Center was made in 1908 when the families of Orlando McConaughy and J. N. Ashburn visited in Idaho. What better way to keep the ladies together so they could visit!

Quilting grandmothers liked to make quilts for grandchildren. Helen Marshall's grandmother, Cinderella Wolley Havens, made a quilt for Helen when she was ten years old. Her name, a tracing of her hand, and the date were embroidered on it, but the quilt was not given to her until her high school graduation.

Although the industrial age brought an interest in machine made goods, and it was considered old-fashioned to work with the hands, happily the idea was short-lived and there has been a renaissance of this American folk art in recent years, heightened by the national quilting projects of the Bicentennial.

SOURCES

Einsel & Creigh, *Quilting: Pioneer Folk Art*, Historical News (Adams County), January 1980; Safford & Bishop, *American Quilts and Coverlets*, 1974; Robertson, *American Quilts*, 1948; personal interviews, Marian Brown, Maxine Thatcher, Leroy Walker, Eileen Paine and Leitha Raffety; Ruth Anderson, *History of Green Hill Kensington*, 1980.

NEW 1990 SUPPORTING MEMBER

Mrs. Elvera CrickKearney

NEW BASIC MEMBER

Mrs. Rebecca RandallGibbon