

# QUILTS ON THE KANSAS FRONTIER

by *Barbara Brackman*



THE EARLY YEARS OF KANSAS SETTLEMENT were decades when quilt making was popular in America and important, not only for production of functional bedding but also as evidence of feminine skills in needlework and as a social event for women and men. Family stories indicate that quilt making was popular in Kansas also, although there is little idea of what kind of quilts were produced in Kansas during those early settlement years. References to quilt making on the frontier in diaries, letters, and memoirs are few, and those that exist are not descriptive of fabrics, styles, or patterns. Hannah Anderson Ropes in her letters from Lawrence in 1856 mentioned quilts and quilt making several times. She described a neighbor's cabin with its stores of food and a quilt making scrap bag: "pendant from the beams overhead hang, in curious proximity, venison, beef, the potato basket, bags for beans, nice dried apple, and patches, together with workbaskets." The bedding at the hotel where Ropes stopped in Lawrence was furnished with "three lounges made of unpeeled wood, over which is stuffed cotton cloth. They are stuffed with prairie grass and nicely covered with patch." Ropes met a woman, "a fair, gentle English woman [who] sat in an adjoining room, sewing together the breadths of a comforter."<sup>1</sup>

Elise Dubach Iseley was more descriptive of the menu than the quilt at a quilting bee in the mid-1850s in Doniphan County. In her memoirs, published in 1935, Iseley recalled that, although she was only a girl, she ran her motherless household and the neighborhood women treated her as an equal, inviting her to their quiltings. In return Iseley held a quilting of her own. "At noon I served them the best dinner I could prepare...chicken and wild grape pie."<sup>2</sup> William Allen White's memories of the quiltings in his Butler County home in the 1870s included a roll listing everyone of "The Quilting Crowd," but no description of the quilts they quilted.<sup>3</sup>

In order to discover more about the quilts made in Kansas, the Kansas Quilt Project in 1986 asked families throughout the state to bring their quilts for registration and photography at a series of Quilt Discovery Days. One goal was to examine quilts made in Kansas between 1854 and 1880 in the hopes of determining how economic and cultural factors influenced the look of Kansas quilts.



*An end-of-the-century photographer recorded a family at work considered even at that point to be quaint and old-fashioned. The woman with the baby is using a drop spindle, the other a walking wheel, to spin a white fiber that appears to be cotton. The photograph, from the collection of the Kansas State Historical Society, is possibly from another state. Although cotton spinning may have been practiced by some Kansans, homespun cotton fabrics were not found in any of the quilts examined by the Kansas Quilt Project.*

Those involved in the Kansas Quilt Project were not optimistic about defining a Kansas quilt—a style or pattern unique to the region—despite evidence of several regional designs developed in states settled earlier. For example, in literature one finds references to regional styles such as the “Baltimore Album” quilt, popular between 1840 and 1860 along the Eastern Seaboard; the New England whole-cloth wool quilt made between 1750 and 1840; and the pieced, lettered quilt similar to an embroidered sampler largely confined to nineteenth-century New York and New Jersey.<sup>4</sup> Frontier Kansas was a settlement of recent immigrants who shared fewer cultural commonalities than did residents of longer-settled regions; Kansas had no significant textile production that might influence a particular style. For these reasons there was no hypothesis that evidence of styles or patterns unique to the state would be found. However, it was important to learn if settlers brought regional designs with them to make into quilts in Kansas and if a scarcity of fabrics, leisure time, and bedding on the frontier affected the quilts made in the first quarter century of settlement.

The year of 1854 was chosen as the earliest date because it was the year Kansas was opened to settlement; 1880 was chosen as the second date because it represented the end of a period in both the history of Kansas and the history of quilts. The end of the Kansas frontier era can be considered 1880. With the coming of the railroad and access to eastern markets and eastern goods, Kansans, at least eastern Kansans, were no longer isolated, and thus manufactured fabrics and bedding were more abundant. The year of 1880 also marks a significant change in quilt styles, fabric, and quilt pattern dissemination. Several mid-century styles, such as the red and green quilt, the applique sampler, and the stuffed work quilt became rare after 1880 while others, such as the crazy quilt, the string quilt and the red and white embroidered quilt, developed around that time. Synthetic dyes were used to color an increasing amount of inexpensive cottons after 1880 and the resultant fading of fabrics (especially green and red) are clues to a date after 1875 or 1880. Thus, the year 1880 is a convenient cutoff point for comparative dating of many types of quilts.



After 1880 the popular press began to exert more influence over the types of quilts being made. Quilt makers obtained patterns from magazines, as well as from friends and neighbors. After 1880 seamstresses could buy fabric scraps specifically for making quilts through mail-order houses. This influence encouraged a homogeneity in styles across place and economic circumstances; a homesteader in the Montana Territory was as likely to make a silk crazy quilt as was a Boston socialite. By narrowing the study to quilts made before 1880 it was hoped to view those more likely to show a regional stylistic influence reflecting the origins of Kansas settlers, rather than the emerging influence of the nationwide popular press.

The Kansas Quilt Project invited families to bring any quilts for registration and photography, unlike some state projects that eliminated recently made quilts or quilts brought to the state from elsewhere. The response was impressive; 13,107 quilts, ranging from circa 1800 through 1988, were registered. Fifty-six items of information on 12,862 quilts were entered into a computerized database. This database could then be searched for quilts made in specific states, cities or counties, and within specific spans of time. Of the 12,862 quilts in the database, only 662 (five percent) were estimated to have been possibly made before 1880. Families were asked to estimate dates, and documentors also estimated a twenty to fifty-year range based on style, pattern, and fabric: there was rarely a conflict between the two estimates. Of these, 153 were thought by their current owners, who were usually descendants of the makers, to have been made in Kansas. While some families appeared confident of their quilts' origins, many seemed to have guessed where their quilts might have been made. Because dates can only be confirmed in terms of general decades, there was hesitation in drawing conclusions about Kansas quilts from these undated quilts. The problem is illustrated by a red, white, and green appliqued "Rose" quilt brought in for registration. The current owner, who was more knowledgeable than most about quilt and family history, attributed it to her grandmother, Susan Herrington Heddens (1832-1915), and related that the quilt had been made for a wedding trousseau between 1856 and 1858. Born in New York, Susan Herrington had migrated with her brother to Missouri around 1853. In 1855 she joined her parents in Coffey County and there married Levi Purviance Heddens in 1858. The documentors dated the quilt in a range of "1840 to 1880," the years when

applique quilts in this color scheme were most likely to have been made.

Although the family history on the above mentioned quilt is probably reliable, the quilt might have been made in New York or Missouri. This illustrates the quilt project's dilemma in documenting quilts made in Kansas. It was decided to eliminate quilts that could not be confirmed as being made in Kansas before 1880. The search was narrowed to quilts that had a date before 1880 actually inscribed on them in ink or stitchery and to those that were thought by the family to have been made here. Family stories could then be checked against public records such as censuses and city directories to determine if the maker lived in Kansas when she made the quilt. Because fewer than ten percent of the quilts in the survey had dates inscribed on them by the maker, the body of information was narrowed significantly. To expand it further, the researchers did not confine themselves to quilts brought to Quilt Discovery Days, but they looked at dated Kansas quilts in museums and private collections and those published in the popular press. Still, only six such quilts dated before 1880 and attributed to Kansans were found. Follow-up research on most of these indicated that they had not been made in Kansas. Typical is a "Bear's Paw" signed "Mary Ellen Neese, 1861" in the collection of the Kansas Museum of History. The donor, the maker's granddaughter, thought it might have been made in Shawnee County. A check of the census records and local histories indicates that Mary Ellen Neese lived in Champaign County, Ohio, in 1861, and did not arrive in Kansas until 1872. The conclusion must be that she made the quilt in Ohio and brought it to Kansas. A pieced top in the design aptly called "Kansas Troubles," with the embroidered signature "J 1858," is attributed by the family, who brought it to the Seneca Quilt Discovery Day, to an aunt with the last name Jessee, possibly made in Nemaha County. The 1875 Kansas census shows a twenty-nine-year-old S. Jessee who migrated to Nemaha County between 1869 and 1871 (a date based on the ages and birthplaces of her children). The quilt top, which was machine quilted in the twentieth century, was most likely made in Virginia when the maker was seventeen. A signed friendship quilt, possibly made for J. W. Lippitt, his name being in the center block with the date, has forty-four signatures, primarily from members of the Lewis and Curtis families. This was attributed to makers in Lecompton. A check of the 1860 territorial census, the 1865 state census, and the



1870 federal census reveals no Lippitts living in Kansas, and none of the signers with more unusual names, such as Layton D. Lewis, Atlanta Lewis, Minerva Curtis, or Lucetta Curtis. Again, the quilt was probably made in the East and brought to Kansas by later emigrants.

A signed and dated "Star and Flag" quilt published in various books and magazines has been attributed to Mary Tillotson of Lawrence,<sup>5</sup> but Kansas censuses and Lawrence city directories show no Mary Tillotson living in Douglas County at that time. A silk crazy quilt attributed to Hila Bennitt Raymond was dated 1865, 1885, and 1886. The documentors were doubtful that such a quilt would have been made in 1865, fifteen years before the crazy quilt fad of the 1880s. An interview with the current owner, the maker's granddaughter, clarified that the center portion—diamonds pieced of silk—was made in Ohio in 1865 and brought to Kansas in 1868 to be used as a chair cushion. It was later incorporated into the crazy quilt, and the three dates represented the start and the end of the quilt, but Hila Raymond did not work on the patchwork in the years between her arrival in Kansas and 1885.

Of the six date-inscribed quilts attributed to Kansans between 1854 and 1880, only one could be confirmed to have been made by a maker living in the state the year the quilt is dated. According to family history, Drusilla Showalter Bryant Cole homesteaded land near Moundridge with her husband Thornton in 1872 and made a pieced "Triple Irish Chain" quilt there in 1876. The 1875 state census records a twenty-seven-year-old Drusilla Cole, her husband, and a six-year-old daughter.

Despite the project's database, which is the largest of any quilt project in the country to date, the researchers were left with a single quilt to represent the quilts made in Kansas before 1880. The Cole quilt is typical of its era in color, style, and workmanship. It is pieced of four fabrics, all plain cottons, green, yellow, and brown on a white background. The "Triple Irish Chain" pattern, while not difficult, is made of small pieces. The quilting is rather intricate, with stars and feathers backed by a grid one-half inch apart and the quilted initials and date "DC to C 1876" (the C possibly may be a G). The quilting stitches measure nine to eleven stitches per inch; only ten percent of the quilts seen had quilting as fine as this. The border is appliqued, a technique that is more wasteful of fabric and more time-consuming than the piecing in the central design. It is not a utility quilt made in a hurry to provide warmth nor a scrap quilt made of salvaged fab-

rics. The quilt is well made and rather elegant: Drusilla Cole possibly made this as a gift for her husband. While one of the fabrics has bled onto the white, the quilt does not seem to have had much use and may have been saved as a special quilt.

The question remains as to whether this quilt is representative of quilts made in Kansas before 1880. There are many similarities between the Cole quilt and the quilts that were attributed to Kansas residents and that might have been made before 1880. At random, fifty quilts were selected from the possible pool of Kansas quilts, and these were analyzed. Like the Cole quilt, nearly all were cotton, the most popular fabric for American quilts in the mid-nineteenth century. Forty of the fifty were made from at least one large piece of yardage, usually a plain white cotton, indicating that some of the fabric was bought specifically for the quilt, rather than being totally from salvaged fabric or sewing scraps. Twenty-two of the fifty quilts had a variety of cotton scraps, but the majority had a more controlled color scheme like the Cole quilt. The Cole quilt had a border, an indicator of a fancy quilt since borders usually require yardage rather than scraps. Only twenty of the fifty quilts had borders. The border on the Cole quilt contained applique work, a technique less common than piecing as it requires more yardage and time. (There were more than twice as many pieced quilts as applique in the database of quilts made between 1800 and 1987.) Sixteen of the fifteen Kansas attributed quilts contained applique work. While a number of the Kansas quilts were simple pieced designs, only two or three might be characterized as utility quilts with coarse fabrics, large pieces, haphazard construction techniques, and tying rather than quilting.

In many ways—fabric, technique, workmanship, and color—the Cole quilt is typical of the quilts that are attributed to Kansans in the first twenty-five years of settlement. However, few conclusions can be drawn about mid-nineteenth century Kansas quilts. There are too few examples, even if the 153 attributed to Kansans, which may have been made in Ohio, Pennsylvania or Kentucky, are considered. Those that are known are of a diverse nature, indicating no transplantation or generation of any specific regional styles and patterns. What was found is that the quilts reputedly made in Kansas between 1854 and 1880 are a sample of the types of quilts made in the eastern states at that time.

Why so few quilts made by Kansans on the frontier were discovered is another difficult question. One pos-



sible answer is that the current owners of these quilts did not bring them to the Quilt Discovery Days for registration. They may have considered them too worn or plain for public display at a community quilt day. It may be that families believed that only exceptional quilts or quilts in excellent shape were desired for study. However, it was hoped that the publicity about the quilt days communicated the project's interest in plain as well as in fancy quilts, and the project was successful in seeing a range of types. A great number of worn quilts and even some fragments of worn quilts were registered. Many plain quilts, crude quilts, and tied comforters made of sewing scraps and recycled clothing, obviously made for warmth rather than beauty, were seen, but all but one or two were made in patterns, styles, and fabrics in use after 1880. From the research done, it seems that there is not a large body of yet undiscovered frontier quilts in private or museum collections in the state.

The conclusion must be that there are very few surviving frontier quilts, either because few were made or because the quilts that were made saw hard use and wore out generations ago. There is evidence to support both explanations for the lack of frontier quilts.

When comparing the Kansas frontier to the more settled places that produced large numbers of quilts, it is important to recall how few women lived in Kansas in the first years of settlement. In 1860, Kansas had 47,925 female residents. Virginia, New York, and Ohio, the three most populous states, each had over twenty times as many women in 1860. Although Kansas' population increased by nearly 240 percent by 1870, there were still far fewer women than men in the state and relatively few women compared to states which produced the nineteenth-century quilts seen in the project; in 1870 there were 162,000 women in Kansas as compared to 1,328,000 in Ohio.<sup>6</sup> The relative scarcity of Kansas quilt makers may partially explain the scarcity of Kansas quilts.

The scarcity of fabric on the frontier is a probable contributing factor to the lack of Kansas-made quilts. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that quilts are made as bedding in time of fabric shortages, quilts require a rather abundant supply of fabric (about ten yards for top and backing). This fabric comes from yardage bought expressly for the purpose, cutaways from clothing production and home decorating, or recycled fabric such as clothing, drapes, or feed sacks.

Additionally, Kansas has had little significant textile manufacturing; the 1870 census reports nine woolen-goods manufacturing establishments and not one cot-

ton manufacturer.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, fabric for quilts would most likely have been imported from the eastern United States or European mills, and references to fabric in the early years of settlement indicate that it was generally in short supply. Chestina Bowker Allen's diary entry for April 4, 1857, remarked on the arrival of a newcomer to Pottawatomie County from New Hampshire who brought from "the benevolent ladies there 20 yards of calico," as a gift to the settlers. This was apparently a welcome import from the New England mills.<sup>8</sup> Abbie Bright, who spent six months on the plains near Wichita in 1871, mentioned in her diary sewing two dresses for herself. The first was of calico she carried with her from Indiana; the second was of calico brought to her by a visiting brother from Indiana. "My wardrobe is rather a slim affair, but it does for the frontier life."<sup>9</sup> Anna Randolph in 1912 wrote memories of preparations for an 1858 Emporia dance: "There was a rush to...stores. Little could be found suitable for a party dress....In stocking their stores the merchants thought only of necessity."<sup>10</sup> Mrs. S. H. Bennett, writing in the *Emporia Gazette* in 1956, recalled an early source for hard-to-find cotton; the government supplied the Kansa Indians with bolts of calico which they traded to settlers for meat. The calico found its way into some early Lyon County quilts.<sup>11</sup> One exception that noted an abundance of fabric was an 1855 editorial in the *Lawrence Herald of Freedom* that remarked on the volume of cotton cloth sold in the town.<sup>12</sup> The cloth was used to build shelters; it served as roofs, doors, windows, and interior wall surfaces in the hay tents and other structures that were Lawrence's first houses. Although there was apparently no shortage of cotton in Lawrence that year, it may have been too stiff and coarse for quilt making. In 1859 the *Lawrence Republican* advertised a variety of cottons that might have been appropriate for quilt making, including three types of prints: "best styles, common and cheap from 12 1/2 cents per yard down to 7," prices were commensurate with those of the East.<sup>13</sup>

Individual pioneers may have produced their own homegrown linen and wool fabrics, but the project saw no Kansas quilts with family stories of homespun linen, wool, or combination cloth. By the time the state was open to settlement, homespun fabric—that is, fiber spun by hand into yarn and then woven by hand into cloth—was becoming increasingly rare in North America, supplanted by the inexpensive cottons produced by New England's thriving textile industry. References to spinning and weaving in the women's



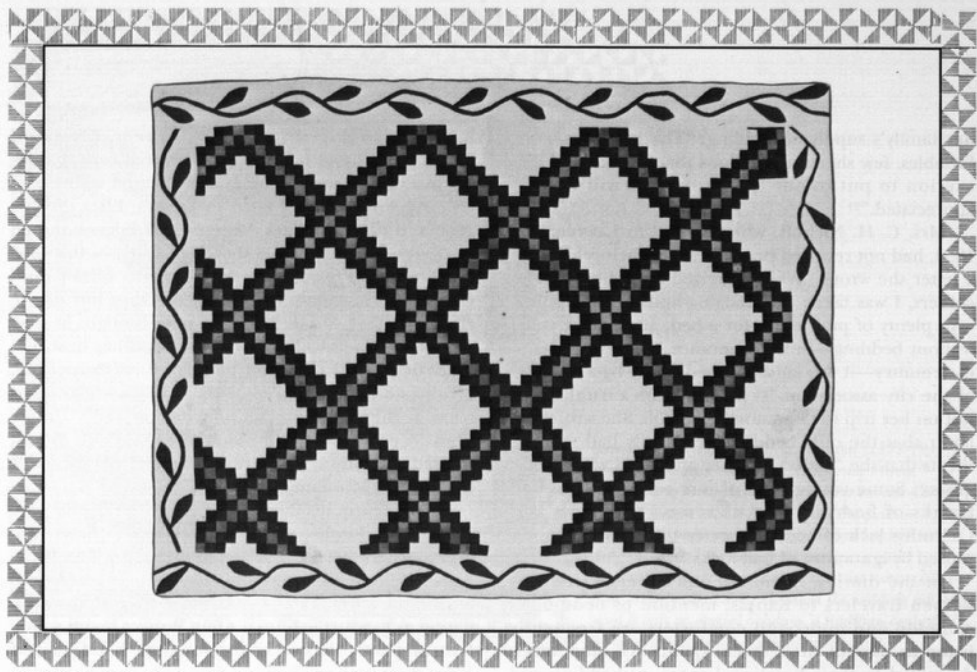
*Thornton (C. J.) and Drusilla Showalter Cole pose with their children at Moundridge near the turn of the century, twenty-five years after Drusilla had made C. J. a quilt as a wedding present.*

letters, diaries, and memoirs indicate that little was done in Kansas. It seems to be a craft that was left behind. Elise Dubach Iseley in her 1935 memoirs recalled watching her Ohio mother-in-law spin wool and linen: "Mother kept up her spinning and weaving until 1872 when she moved from Ohio to Kansas."<sup>14</sup> Abbie Bright, in her 1871 diary, noted a Sedgwick County neighbor's store of "nice linen tablecloths and towels [*sic*] ct. Sheets—the nicest lot I have seen since I left home....She told me she had spun most of it during the [Civil] war when they lived in Virginia."<sup>15</sup> The few quilts seen in the project with linen, wool, and combination fabrics that appeared to be homespun were all reported to have been made elsewhere, and most were earlier than Kansas settlement.

In the quilt project a number of family stories were heard about homespun cotton in Kansas-made quilts. Several nineteenth-century quilts brought to Quilt Days and in Kansas museums were described as having backs of homespun cotton; these descriptions were given by the families and by the project volunteers who noted coarsely woven, white cotton backs as possible homespun. It is unlikely that these coarse backs are homespun cotton, but rather are a manufactured,

inexpensive cotton called "domestic," machine spun and woven to lower standards than the calicos on the fronts of the quilts and common for utility purposes such as quilt backs.

The myth of homespun cotton persists because it supports the larger myth of the independent, self-sufficient, and long-suffering pioneer mother, but few Kansas women had the materials and motivation to handspin and weave cotton cloth to back quilts. Homespun cotton requires both a scarcity of factory-produced goods and access to raw cotton. While most frontier Kansans found factory-produced goods scarce they found raw cotton equally scarce. Cotton has never been a significant Kansas crop, although it will grow in the warmer, southern tier of counties. The 1870 federal census counted seven bales of cotton produced in the state, a small amount compared to states such as Texas (350,628 bales) and North Carolina (144,935 bales) where cotton was an important crop.<sup>16</sup> Even those Kansas pioneers living in the southern counties who had access to raw cotton were unlikely to manufacture homespun cotton quilt backings because of other factors such as the time required for production. It would have been far more efficient to spin and



"Triple Irish Chain" by Drusilla Showalter Cole (1847-1918), McPherson County. Dated 1876 in the quilting. (In the collection of Jacinta Davis.)

weave wool for a blanket—Kansas produced 335,000 pounds of wool in 1870—rather than to spin and weave cotton for a quilt back, which would have to be stitched to the two other layers that make up a quilt—a top cloth of patchwork and a middle layer of unwoven batting.

The project heard stories from quilters who made their own batting from home-grown cotton. One quilter, born in 1900, recalled preparing the batting for a quilt she finished in 1919. She picked the cotton on her grandparents' Cowley County farm, removed the seeds and refuse by hand, and carded the fibers into a batting. Quilt batting has been marketed since 1846, and the majority of the quilts made in Kansas and elsewhere had manufactured batting.<sup>17</sup> A few Kansans living in the southern counties, however, may have produced their own batting in the above described fashion. Such stories may be the source of some of the tales of homespun cotton. A quilt maker's account of a handmade cotton batting could easily be revised over the generations into a tale of a hand-spun cotton back.

While the materials to make quilts in frontier Kansas were apparently scarce, quilts and bedding may have been in good supply, and thus frontierswomen

may have had little need to make quilts in the first years of settlement. Beds in early Kansas appear to have been crude or nonexistent; most newcomers described sleeping on hay-filled pallets in their own homes and in hotels and lodging houses. Chestina Bowker Allen sadly recalled her Massachusetts featherbed and bedstead. They had been "sold at less than half price by the express advice of Mr. Caswell, a gold bowed spectacled man appointed to give advice to Kansas immigrants, said the prairie hay was good enough."<sup>18</sup> Bedding—blankets, quilts, and coverlets to pile over a sleeper and a tick or mattress cover to fill with hay—was a necessity in an emigrant's luggage. Guidebooks suggested two or three blankets and comforters for each traveler.<sup>19</sup> When Abbie Bright's brother wrote to suggest that she come to Kansas, to homestead land in 1871, she wrote in her diary that he told her, "to take heavy strong clothing and whatever I will want for a bed."<sup>20</sup> Several times she mentioned the bedding she brought with her. Her possessions included a pillow, an army blanket, a double blanket, a tick (to be filled with prairie grass), a sheet, a pillow, a pillow slip, and a comforter. Miriam Davis Colt, in her account of a trip to Kansas twenty years earlier, listed



her family's supply of bedding: "The bed ticks, comfortables, few sheets and pillows that we took the precaution to put in our trunks, I think will be duly appreciated."<sup>21</sup>

Mrs. C. H. Nichols, who traveled to Lawrence in 1854, had not received practical advice beforehand. In a letter she wrote, "When I arrived here, like all newcomers, I was taken to a lodging-house and supplied with plenty of prairie hay for a bed, and having come without bedding—in my ignorance of the customs of the country—it was kindly loaned to me by a member of the city association."<sup>22</sup> Jane Carruth's trunks were lost on her trip to Osawatimie in 1856. She wrote in a letter that the only bedding her family had was two sheets that she "basted together and filled with prairie grass....Some young men of our company who had trunks of bedding lent us some."<sup>23</sup> Nichols and Carruth's lack of bedding seems to be an exception caused by ignorance or bad luck.

In the diaries, memoirs, and letters written by women travelers to Kansas, mention of bedding is common and quilts and comforters are frequently listed as part of their stock. Quilts are most often described in their functional sense, as bedding and shelter, but they also are mentioned in their symbolic sense, as souvenirs of family and community and a link with a more elegant life. Quilts sewn of recycled clothing or sewing scraps were viewed as mementos. Hannah Anderson Ropes wrote her mother of the satisfaction she felt in unpacking in Lawrence in 1855 when "two quilts of stripped up dresses, done by your hand, dear mother, are brought from the chest," an indication of quilts' meaning that goes beyond their function as bedding.<sup>24</sup> Quilts marked passages like a woman's coming of age, her engagement, and marriage. Album or friendship quilts with signed blocks were intended to be kept and read in a manner similar to bound autograph albums, tangible reminders of friends and family. The symbolic meaning of quilts added to their value; they were functional, portable, meaningful, and important possessions to bring on the trip to Kansas.

The numerous written references to quilts brought to Kansas from the East are supported by the many surviving quilts that made the trip and have been handed down with family stories that detail the passage. Eliza Stroman Watson's great-granddaughter brought to a Quilt Discovery Day in Paola a well-worn quilt in the design known today as "Honeybee." Eliza was born around 1828 in Ohio; she married Anthony Watson January 24, 1856; and in 1857 they came to

Kansas bringing the quilt with them. Eliza and Anthony are listed in the 1860 territorial census as living in Lykins County (now Miami County) with a one-year-old son, Eugene, born in Kansas. Eliza died in 1863 and two years later Anthony and Eugene moved to Douglas County where they were listed in the 1865 state census. Presumably, they brought Eliza's quilt with them, a memory not only of Ohio but of the child's mother. Susan Black Stayman brought at least two "Rose" quilts with her when she and her husband, a horticulturalist, moved to Leavenworth in 1859. Family stories indicate that one quilt had won first prize at the Galesburg, Illinois, fair in 1855. Unlike Eliza Stroman's quilt, these are in excellent, almost unused condition; they are now in the collection of the Spencer Museum in Lawrence.

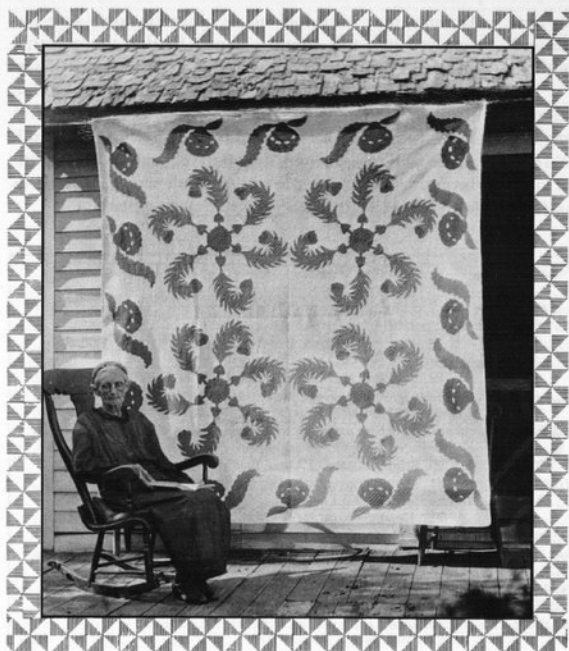
While few quilts made in Kansas before 1880 were discovered, dozens of such quilts likely to have been brought here before that date were found. The abundance of imported quilts and other bedding in Kansas during the early years of settlement suggest an explanation as to why the Kansas Quilt Project found so few Kansas quilts. People brought ample bedding and spent their time producing other items they needed in the first decades.

It is also possible that quilts made here have been used up. The imported quilts endured because they had meaning as well as function; they were reminders of faraway family or represented a more cultured life and home. Quilts made here may have had less symbolic meaning and so were worn out and discarded.

It also may be that the quilts that have survived were of the type meant to be saved, while quilts made here were rougher and more utilitarian. The surviving quilts tend to be thin, cotton, light-colored; and made with care and skill. Because of the limitations of materials, time, and necessity, the quilts made on the frontier may have been thicker, warmer, coarser, and quickly assembled, and of the type made to be used and cast off.

Very few thick quilts, tied quilts, or wool quilts that looked to have been made before 1880 in Kansas or elsewhere were found. Wool quilts succumb to insects and, because they are warmer, stronger, and less likely to soil or rip, they tend to see harder use than cotton quilts. Fragments of one early wool comforter survive in the collection of the Kansas Museum of History. The comforter, made in Boston in 1855, is of fabric cut from the cloaks of Revolutionary War soldiers. The quilt was sent to Lawrence to be sold to raise funds for supplies for free-state settlers. It was purchased by





Around 1930, Louise Swartz Atkinson (1852-1933) posed with a quilt she called "California Plume." According to family history, her mother-in-law, Charity Creal Atkinson (1819-1890), made the quilt in Kickapoo (Leavenworth County) before Louise's wedding in 1870. Like most of the surviving quilts attributed to early Kansas settlers, it was not an everyday, utility quilt. Louise cherished the wedding gift and used it only on special holidays, a tradition continued by her granddaughter, Ruth Atkinson Scott.

Dr. Sylvester Prentiss, whose family cut it into several pieces to pass on among his descendants.<sup>25</sup> The two pieces belonging to the museum indicate that the quilt was thick, sturdy, tied, and filled with a wool batting. This quilt may be one of the few survivors of its type because of its historical connections with the Revolution and Civil War. Heavy wool quilts and comforters with less lofty genealogy have disappeared.

Although few heavy utility quilts made before 1880 survive anywhere in the United States, there is evidence from descriptions in letters, diaries, and memoirs that this type of bedding was common. Miriam Davis Colt recalled that on her mid-1850s trip to Kansas, a friend gave her a "thick woollen quilt to put around me."<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Myrick, traveling across the plains on the Mormon Trail north of Kansas in 1854, wrote that on June 6th it was cold enough to sleep under blankets and "two heavy quilts."<sup>27</sup>

Mid-nineteenth century writers in Kansas and elsewhere may have been making a distinction between two types of quilts—fancy and functional—when they used the words "quilts" and "comforters," also called "comforts" or "comfortables." Hannah Anderson Ropes unpacked her mother's New England quilts but saw a Kansan working on a comforter. An 1853 Pennsylvania estate inventory lists "lots of quilts and

comforts."<sup>28</sup> Eliza Leslie's *The House Book*, published in 1846, described "soft thick quilts used as a substitute for blankets and laid under the bedspread....a thick comfortable may be found a convenient substitute for a mattress."<sup>29</sup> Some references indicate that a comfort is tied or tacked together rather than quilted—a significant saving in time. Myra Inman Carter, a southerner, wrote in her diary in October 1861, "Pretty day. Tacked a comfort this morning."<sup>30</sup> Others like Eliza Leslie used comfort, comforter, or comfortable to describe thick, quilted bedcovers, although Leslie advised her readers that they "need not attempt to take close short stitches" in a comfortable, an indication that they were to be made in a hurry.<sup>31</sup> Today the definition of comforter is a "heavy quilt" (also still called a comfort and a comfortable in some regions),<sup>32</sup> bedding somewhat different from most of the surviving pre-1880 quilts made in Kansas or brought by settlers.

That quilts received hard use on the frontier is also evident in women's writings. Quilts were used as bedding but also served as protection from the elements. Miriam Davis Colt mentioned that on the trip to Kansas the wagon master pinned quilts to the wagon tops to protect the travelers from the rain.<sup>33</sup> Chestina Bowker Allen's diary entry for March 26, 1854, stated,

"It was a cold blustery day, but we moved into our new house, it consists of two rooms on the lower floor and the attics, we nailed up quilts to make it more comfortable."<sup>34</sup>

Drusilla Cole's granddaughter recalled a family story about Drusilla flapping quilts to drive away the grasshoppers in her cabbage patch during the 1874 grasshopper invasion, an event similar to one recounted in Joanna Stratton's *Pioneer Women*.<sup>35</sup>

Drusilla may have had many quilts but only one has survived into this century. It may be that the one that was passed on was considered special and worth saving. The others had less meaning for her and her children and were worn or thrown away. What makes Drusilla Cole's case unusual is that she saved the quilt made in Kansas; others may have considered the quilts brought here to be the quilts worth saving, leaving us with few quilts made on the Kansas frontier.

## NOTES

Barbara Brackman is on the board of the Kansas Quilt Project, a contributing editor to Quilter's Newsletter Magazine, and author of several books on quilts, including the recently published *Clues in the Calico: A Guide to Identifying and Dating Antique Quilts*.

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