

## Exhibition Wall Text and Extended Labels

*Going West! Quilts and Community*  
Smithsonian American Art Museum  
Oct. 5, 2007—Jan. 21, 2008

Going West! Quilts and Community celebrates quilts as an essential form of creative expression for women on the American frontier. Beginning in the 1840s, three major trails to the West followed along the Great Platte River through Nebraska Territory. The Oregon Trail, the Mormon Trail, and the California Trail converged there, and many who made the difficult journey chose to settle in the area rather than continue on. The fifty quilts shown here were either brought as cherished possessions on the overland migration or created in the new settlers' communities. All are drawn from the rich collections of Nebraska museums and historical societies.

Quiltmakers were endlessly creative—using fine or utilitarian fabrics, pieced or whole cloth, embroidery or appliqué. Some quilts reflect personal concerns or family histories, while others were communal projects. Though patterns were widely shared, each quilt is a unique expression. The Fan, Wagon Wheel, Log Cabin, Lone Star and other patterns reflect the frontier experience directly. Others are mathematical abstractions of fabric, color, and form. Designs can occasionally be traced to ancient cultures as diverse as the Druids, Aztecs, and Egyptians. Crazy quilts offer a more "modern" free-for-all expressionism of texture, exuberance, and embroidery. Figurative appliquéd quilts reveal another dimension, with subtle stitching patterns—revealed only on close inspection—contrasting with bold appliqués. And quilting was often a social activity for the community, producing objects for fund-raisers and farewell gifts. The fine state preservation of many of these unusually fine quilts is evidence that they were cherished as treasures in frontier homes rather than treated as utilitarian goods.

The makers of many quilts are unknown today, and their stories are silent except for the vivid aesthetic expressiveness of their surviving works. Where the makers are known—through signatures sewn into the quilts, or through letters and documents that accompanied the textile through the decades—we find the pride they took in these exceptional accomplishments. These remarkable artworks restore vivid color to our own understanding of history and experience.

The Museum gratefully acknowledges the support of Helen and Peter Bing for this exhibition.

**Unidentified makers*****The Red Cross Quilt***

probably Merrick County, Nebraska, about 1917

cotton; pieced and quilted; inked signatures

Lent by the Merrick County Historical Museum, Central City

Participation in the war effort for World War I was urged upon American women by influential ladies' magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar* and *Ladies' Home Journal*. A Red Cross fund-raising quilt was illustrated in the December 1917 issue of the *Modern Priscilla*, and such quilts soon appeared across the country. Red Cross chapters auctioned or raffled these beautiful quilts, the proceeds used for the purchase of supplies for the "Boys Over There." All were similar in their choice of the Red Cross as a motif, but with slight variations in placement and workmanship.

Quiltmakers in Merrick County, Nebraska, where this quilt was probably made, distinguished their piece with finely quilted patterns of feathered plumes and wreaths.

**Probably made by the Woman's Relief Corps*****The G.A.R. Flag Quilt***

Grand Island, Hall County, Nebraska, marked 1898

cotton; pieced, appliquéd, and quilted; embroidered signatures

Lent by the Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, Grand Island

Drawn to Nebraska Territory by the 1862 Homesteading Act, large numbers of Civil War veterans found new communities of comrades through membership in the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR)—the largest and most influential of the groups formed by Union veterans following the war. Established originally as a social and fraternal organization, members directed their efforts toward veterans' needs and, importantly, to the enshrinement of the flag as America's principal patriotic icon. This handsome flag quilt was worked in 1898, probably by the Woman's Relief Corps, the GAR's female auxiliary. Twenty flags filled with embroidered signatures form the surface of this quilt.

**Savilla M. Fox*****Savilla Fox's Pomegranate Quilt***

provenance unknown, 1866

cotton; appliquéd and quilted

Lent by the Fort Sidney Museum, Sidney

As they journeyed west, a substantial number of pioneer women botanized across the country, their diaries, journals, and letters rich with their observations. In 1853, traveling from Wisconsin to Oregon, Clarissa E. Taylor posted a letter to her friend Mrs. Hadley, describing "the most beautiful and splendid, the grandest specimens of the floral kingdom." On her own vibrant quilt, Savilla Fox chose to stitch a series of stylized pomegranates, the clusters of curving sprays arranged geometrically within simple, undulating borders. In small stitches of white thread, she quilted her name, the date, and, tucked between petals and leaves, a sentimental series of tiny hearts.

**Mrs. Azuba Read*****The Milliner's Quilt***

Phelps County, Nebraska, about 1910

wool, velvet, silk, cotton, felt, feathers, metal; embroidered

Lent by the Nebraska Prairie Museum of the Phelps County Historical Society, Holdrege

The milliner's shop was an early presence on the streets of frontier towns—the settlers' wives demanded it! They had given up almost everything to accommodate this move to the prairie, but they were not prepared to give up fashion. Silk, satins and velvets, felt and feathers are featured in abundance on a type of crazy quilt created by Mrs. Azuba Read, a milliner who lived in Phelps County, Nebraska. Perhaps including individual leaves and petals from an eastern source of milliner's supplies, Azuba's clever hands cut and constructed the significant number of embellished botanical elements randomly affixed to the dark ground.

**Edith Withers Meyers**

***You are the Darling of the Earth, Crazy Quilt***

about 1898

wool

Lent by the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln

Rather than committing her life to the pages of a traditional journal, this exuberant maker has chronicled important events, the names of her friends, and even contemporary slang in running-stitch script on cloth. Edith Withers Meyers must have been young at the time, with a lively social life—her inscriptions hint that she was not yet married or focused on husband and children. The dates in the inscriptions are 1898, and she commemorates the occasions so important to youth like the “skating party on North River” and the “Swede Dance.” She delights in memorializing the latest slang like “Toots” and “Buzz” and “Yes, you bet.” There is even a sly reference—to a rival in love or a disapproving relative?—stating, “Ada was mad.” Finally, a block is somewhat enigmatically inscribed “done at lass,” or more likely “done at last.” Were these the final stitches of her labors and, in her haste, she forgot to cross the *t*? Try to imagine the high-spirited creator of this unique chronicle of life in turn-of-the-century Nebraska.

**Ladies Aid Society of the Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church**

***The Omaha Commerce Quilt***

Omaha, Douglas County, Nebraska, 1895

cotton; pieced, embroidered, and quilted

Lent by the Durham Western Heritage Museum, Omaha

*Omaha Commerce Quilt* shows how quilting could involve an entire community. The piece is a group effort, a fund-raising quilt made by the members of the Ladies Aid Society of the Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Omaha. Local businesses “purchased” advertising space on its surface, each design drafted and stitched by a different woman, which is obvious from the varying levels of skill. The resulting quilt was undoubtedly displayed, thus providing mini-billboard publicity for the donating commercial enterprises. Afterward, it might have been either auctioned or raffled to raise additional funds or presented to a civic leader.

**Swedish Methodist Church members**

***Blue Embroidered Spokes of Signatures***

1926

cotton

Lent by the Nebraska Prairie Museum of the Phelps County Historical Society, Holdrege

The mid-nineteenth century experienced a rise in romanticism and an increase in literacy that made autograph collecting popular. The development of inks thought to be permanent to cloth soon extended the custom to signing quilts, though the “signature quilts” or “autograph quilts” that have survived best tend to have their inked autographs gone over in outline stitching. Inked writing and motifs have been found on quilts dating from 1830, with full fledged signature quilts appearing as early as 1839.

***The Silk Mosaic Child's Quilt***

London, England, about 1843

silk; pieced

Lent by the Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, Grand Island

The daughter of an English merchantman, Ann Sarah Harvey married Peter Johnson Bentley in 1841, when she was twenty-five years of age. The eldest of her four children, Charles Frederick Bentley, was born July 4, 1843, and it was for him she worked this lovely bit of fancy. Construction and cloth are often significant clues as to the social status of a quiltmaker. By the end of the eighteenth century, affluent Englishwomen were enthusiastically using their leisure time to fold bits of expensive silks and chintz around hexagonal paper patterns. The fabric Ann Sarah selected was varied: floral prints, stripes, and plaids, and in both the central field and the top border a silk fondu print with yellow moving into blue.

**Unidentified maker**

***Maternity Dress***

provenance unknown, about 1840

wool and cotton

Lent by the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln

There exist only a very few objects of clothing worn on the trail; most were quite simply worn out. This brown plaid wool challis dress is a splendid exception. Significantly, details of the garment's carefully hand-sewn construction reveal it to be a maternity dress, later altered for regular wear. Although many women were pregnant when their great journey began, mention of those pregnancies is conspicuously scarce in their travel diaries, and the birth of a child on the trail usually is noted with only a cursory mention. Near the end of her overland journey to Washington Territory in 1853, Amelia Knight wrote, "Turn our stock out to tolerably good feed. A few days later my eighth child was born. After this we picked up and ferried across the Columbia River, utilizing a skiff, canoes and flatboat. . . This is the journey's end."

**Unidentified maker**

***Anvil Doll Bedcover***

provenance unknown, late 19th century

cotton; pieced

Lent by the Historical Society of Garden County, Oshkosh

Quiltmakers have always used "bits and pieces" to construct something small with which to delight a child. Doll quilts of the nineteenth century seldom depicted childish whimsies. In pattern and palette they were, quite simply, large quilts sewn small. Worked within the female community, they were stitched by loving mothers or grandmothers, sisters or aunts—and eventually by the child herself, almost as soon as she could hold a needle.

**Anna L. Smith**

***Nine-Patch Blocks with Sawtooth Border***

Northwestern New York, about 1869

cotton; pieced

Lent by the Loup County Historical Society, Taylor

Anna L. Smith made this small, pieced doll quilt when she was nine years old. It was where she began to learn her skills as a quiltmaker: simple nine-patches were set and sashed and encased within a classic sawtooth border. Years later, in 1884, Anna and her husband, Edwin, traveled from the East to Blaine County, Nebraska, and Anna brought her childhood treasure with her. Like many pioneers, they survived much and learned to prosper: Edwin developed one of Blaine County's largest cattle ranches, and Anna cultivated a wide range of domestic pleasures and pastimes, including flower gardens, embroidery, knitting, and quilting. For almost a century, a number of ladies from Blaine and Loup counties attended meetings of the Clever Clique Club, gathering in each others' homes for sewing and quilting. For pioneer women, particularly in such sparsely populated counties, such organizations were socially and creatively significant, and Anna was one of the club's earliest members.

**Ellen Holen**

***The Holen Boys Ties Quilt***

about 1935

silk

Lent by the Nebraska Prairie Museum of the Phelps County Historical Society, Holdrege, NE, with permission by the Holen Family

With its simple embroidered "This is the Holen Boys Necktie Quilt," this message quilt makes a striking visual statement. Nearly a hundred silk neckties explode in a fireball of energy. Who were the Holen boys? How did they have so many neckties, and why did they surrender them for this quilt?

**Ladies Aid Society of the  
Methodist Episcopal Church**

***The Trans-Mississippi Exposition Quilt***

Valentine, Cherry County, Nebraska, 1898

cotton; primarily machine embroidered

Lent by the Cherry County Historical Museum, Valentine

In the fall of 1895, inspired to move their city beyond its frontier image and greet a new century, Omaha's businessmen and politicians determined that the city would present a Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition. The ambitious project represented thirty-one states and several foreign countries, and was held from June to November 1898, drawing 2.5 million visitors. The Ladies Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church decided that the small town of Valentine should participate in the exposition. They submitted for exhibition in the "woman's work" area of the Liberal Arts Building this wonderfully worked quilt celebrating their community and themselves. Its purpose is confirmed by the inscription on its left and right borders: Trans-Mississippi Exposition 1898.

**Unidentified maker**

***The Swedish Red Silk Quilt***

Sweden, possibly Upsala, first half 19th century

silk; quilted

Lent by the Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, Grand Island

In 1861, Swedish emigrants Charles Shieldstrom, his wife, Christine Netzel, and their children boarded a sailing vessel for North America and brought along this fine, red silk quilt. Their journey took them from Canada to Maine, and eventually to Merrick County, Nebraska, where the family settled in Central City. The quilt is one of great sophistication, with three strips of red silk forming its top. Tiny, even quilting stitches sculpt an intricate and imaginative central field of interwoven, double cordlike elements. On the borders, long and rather languid leaves alternate with simple, eight-petaled flowers sparsely meandering over a stipplequilted ground. This is the work of an exceptional quiltmaker, working in an atmosphere of patience and privilege.

**Sara Barbary Good Boldon**

***Wagon Wheels Crazy Quilt***

Craig, Burt County, Nebraska, about 1890

wool; pieced, tied, pressed, and embroidered

Lent by the Burt County Museum, Tekamah

At the end of the nineteenth century, Sara Boldon styled this wonderful wool crazy quilt. In choosing the wagon wheel as her primary motif, Sara chose the iconic image of the trail that had brought her, husband James, and their nine children to Burt County, Nebraska, years earlier. For overland travelers, the wagon was, of course, the most important item to be considered. The westering wife usually had a vital task in the preparation of the wagon: constructing the waterproof cover, placing foodstuffs into sacks she had sewn for that purpose, and arranging for the five hundred pounds of clothing and bedding that travel guides suggested would be required for the journey—a daunting activity usually shared by family and friends.

**Mary Magdalene Mook Norris**

***Mary Norris's "Blazing Star" Quilt***

Sandusky County, Ohio, about 1895

cotton; pieced, piped, and quilted

Lent by the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln

There is seldom evidence of a pattern name assigned to an early quilt by the quiltmaker herself, and there is no note or diary entry to tell what name (if any) Mary Norris might have assigned to this splendid star quilt. Regional and period preferences often determined the name of a particular quilt pattern. These great stars were among the most extravagant and sophisticated of America's earliest pieced quilts, made large and often of floral chintz fabrics.

**Bernice Ellis Lunder*****The Comics Quilt***

probably Omaha, Nebraska, 1935

cotton; appliquéd, embroidered, and quilted

Lent by the Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, Grand Island

If one did not enjoy the professional status of a milliner or a dressmaker, a woman's dexterity with her needle and thread could nevertheless realize a small amount of "pin money" through a newspaper or magazine contest, or a state or local fair. For a quilt contest in 1935, Bernice Ellis Lunder entered the *Comics Quilt*, featuring forty-nine characters from the funny papers. According to Omaha's *Evening World Herald* (August 29, 1935), Mrs. Lunder "drew all the characters free hand and then appliquéd them. Each comic folk is true to character."

**Marie Tejkl Prokopec*****Mary Prokopec's Star Medallion Crazy Quilt***

Clarkson, Colfax County, Nebraska, about 1900

wool; embroidered

Lent by the Howells Historical Society Museum

Immigrant women brought with them to America many exquisite needlework traditions of their native countries. In 1879 the Tejkl family emigrated from Bohemia to Colfax County, Nebraska, and it was in that Czechoslovakian community that daughter Marie married Vincent Prokopec in 1886, at the age of seventeen. Years later, she determined to make a quilt of the type then wildly popular in her new homeland, embellishing its rich surface with the embroidered motifs of flowers and birds she had worked in her girlhood. In Czechoslovakia the tradition of decorated textiles was remarkably rich, but the intricate stitches were primarily displayed on costumes and a variety of household linens; there seems not to have been an extensive tradition of quilts.

**Made by or for Sarah McManus Billinger*****The "Prince's Feathers" Quilt***

probably Preble County, Ohio, mid-19th century

cotton; appliquéd and quilted

Lent by the Gage County Historical Society Museum, Beatrice

Unless a quilt is discreetly signed, authorship after a century and a half is often impossible to confirm, and this is the case with the *"Prince's Feathers."* The quilt is attributed to Sarah McManus Billinger, but it also could have been given to Sarah as the work of a loving mother. Eight of Sarah's ten children survived, and by 1889 two had gone west: Frank and his wife to farm, and her daughter Sarah to teach, both in Phelps County, Nebraska. The quilt probably moved west with one or the other.

**Unidentified maker*****The Civil War Quilt***

provenance unknown, about 1860

cotton; appliquéd and quilted

Lent by the Gage County Historical Society Museum, Beatrice

On November 29, 1861, at age nineteen, Joseph Miller joined the Union army and enlisted in the newly organized 78th Ohio Volunteer Infantry. At some point in the midst of that long and dreadful war, one bitterly cold evening the men were sent out to surrounding farm homes to ask for blankets. Joseph was given this splendid appliquéd quilt. Finely quilted over both pattern and ground, the parallel lines are a scant one quarter inch apart—the result of a quiltmaker's best effort. Its bright colors were almost obliterated by the filth of the battlefields, but its fabric remained whole. After the war, soaked and scrubbed, the quilt was kept by the young man throughout the next half-century of his life. From Ohio, he moved west, first to Owen County, Indiana, in 1865; Andrew County, Missouri, in 1870, and then in 1898 to Beatrice, Nebraska, where he died, in 1913, at the age of seventy-one.

**Mrs. Ella Hughes Burke**

*Friend Ship Quilt - started in 1898 & finished 1928*

1931

cotton

Lent by the Fort Sidney Museum, Sidney

Besides the communal fund-raising efforts, many friendship, commemorative, or presentation quilts were created for individuals. A quilt was often presented on the occasion of a marriage, but usually such a gift signified that the recipient was leaving the community. Separate blocks would be signed by their individual makers and then assembled into a top that was quilted by the group. These quilts then became mementos of those left behind. The lucky recipient of this handsome piece must have been well liked, for the quilt contains 192 signatures, each enclosed in a “petal” of a flower.

**Mrs. Ken Armbruster**

*Embroidered Wool Bedcover*

York, York County, Nebraska, 1904

wool; embroidered

Lent by the Anna Bemis Palmer Museum, York

The woman known to us as Mrs. Ken Armbruster embroidered onto the thirty-five floral panels of this woolen bedcover when she was just a girl of twelve. The pattern is unidentified; it was perhaps a commercial pattern or one glimpsed in one of the popular women’s magazines, or drawn by an indulgent family member or neighbor. This charming textile evokes certain stylistic preferences of many colonial American needleworkers. A number of extant embroidered bedcovers present similar images, usually on smaller blocks. In what must have been an exercise in patience for a young girl, this piece carried the threads of early American embroidered bedcovers into a third century.

**Unidentified maker**

*The Pawnee City Newspaper Quilt*

Pawnee City, Pawnee County, Nebraska, 1890-92

cotton; embroidered

Lent by the Pawnee City Historical Society and Museum

Many frontier establishments bought textile ads to promote their business interests. The style of the ads on this quilt is similar to the graphics of the newspaper advertisements of the period. The quilt was likely created to raise funds for a cause, but although two dates appear (1890 and 1892) there is no indication of quiltmaker, sponsor, or purpose, either on the quilt itself or in extant copies of the *Pawnee Republican*, Nebraska’s fifth oldest newspaper. If the quilt was raffled off, we do not know who won it; if it was a presentation quilt, we do not know to whom it was given. We only know that someone kept it safe for decades, and during the next century someone unidentified left it on the steps of the Pawnee City Post Office.

**1854 map showing the Nebraska and Kansas territories  
(published by J. H. Colton & Co., New York). Courtesy  
David Rumsey Map Collection**

Starting in the 1840s, three of the major trails to the western United States paralleled each other along the Great Platte River, through what is now Nebraska. The Oregon Trail, the Mormon Trail, and the California Trail converged, carrying wagon trains and settlers bound for farther west. Some at this point decided they had gone as far as they could on the perilous journey and settled permanently in the area. Though several towns and forts had already been established, the ratification of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 officially opened and established the Nebraska Territory. The act created the territory’s original boundaries, encompassing the leftover land from the Louisiana Purchase which spanned from the Missouri River basin to the Canadian border. By the time it gained statehood in 1867, Nebraska had become a destination in itself, with homesteaders competing for free land granted by the federal government and later lured to land offered by the railroad companies.