GROUP QUILTING IN KANSAS

by Mary Margaret Rowen

As the Kansas Quilt Project traced quilt ownership throughout the state, it became evident that many quilts had been made or quilted by groups rather than by an individual. The project’s research revealed much about these groups; perhaps one of the most important points being that the groups shared an identification with the quilts they produced. The quilts were not referred to as being made by an individual but by the name of the group. This group identification, however, must be examined more closely for a group of quilters can produce a quilt in many different ways. For example, a group might piece together or applique or embroider a quilt top. The pieced top might not be put together with a batt and backing until more leisure time is available or interest is renewed later. At other times, a group might take a quilt top it has not made and quilt it, producing a finished piece. The Kansas Quilt Project found many variations in the activities of quilting groups.

The quilting groups identified as a result of the quilt project were numerous, but the numbers of groups that have existed in the past and of those still meeting are not known. For this article, reference will be only to groups still meeting or groups with members still living.

When researching these quilting groups and interviewing members, the Kansas Quilt Project observed several questions emerging. Among these were what held these groups together and how did a group of individuals work elbow to elbow and not have some differences of opinion. Other questions involved how the groups decided which patterns and colors to use and what colors were determined to be unattractive. Of additional interest were the sources for patterns and fabrics; what standards were set for the quality of work; if a quilt was ever considered to be ugly; and if quilting was the main reason for a group’s existence. The answers were gathered through written questionnaires, telephone conversations, and personal interviews; while this article will not directly deal with all questions and answers, a general tone can be gathered from the groups presented. Quilters are very generous people who share their love of quilting in whatever way they are asked.

Generally, quilt groups reflect the small towns and rural communities that make up Kansas. Often a rural church or school, or perhaps just a group of nearby farm families are the binding agent for these groups. While this reflects the expected stereotype of farm women getting together for a day of quilting,
the project also found quilting groups in towns and cities, dispelling some of the folk culture that has been applied to the medium.

There seem to be two kinds of quilting groups: those that quilt for humanitarian purposes, raising money with their finished products for special causes; and those for which quilting is just one of many activities of a social, educational, or religious group.

The names of the groups are as interesting as the quilts that they have produced and tell a great deal about a particular group such as its members' sense of humor, creativity, sense of values, and relationship to the community. Among these interesting names are Gab and Giggle in Hoxie, the Little House of Quilters of Ulysses (the meetings are in a small building in a member's backyard), and the Patchin' Pals of Liberal. Through a 1923 friendship quilt registered at a Quilt Discovery Day, the Kansas Quilt Project became aware of the still active Willing Workers of Atchison. An undated newspaper account from the group's scrapbook aptly describes this quilting group:

When Shakespeare made one of his characters exclaim, scornfully, "What's in a name?" he had never heard of "The Willing Workers." All of us who know the Willing Workers know there's a lot in a name. There are 40 women in the club . . . and as the name implies, they work, willingly, in helping those less fortunate than themselves. Tonight the Willing Workers will give their tenth annual party including entertainment and refreshments at the county hospital.

The Willing Workers currently meet at the Senior Center in Atchison where there is plenty of room and good lighting. When the quilt project researchers visited the group, members were making tied comforters. A group of women sat at a table tracing around templates of cardboard or sandpaper placed rough-side-down. Others were cutting the squares of fabric. Some were ripping up polyester double knit garments. Slack suits and dresses that will never wear out but will not sell at a rummage sale were being transformed into multicolored lap quilts and tied comforters. While two ladies made sewing machines purr, it was stated that in 1987 they had tied four quilts (comforters) and twenty-one lap robes. During the researchers' visit the women finished binding a full-size comforter, put another together, tied it, and sold it for twenty-five dollars. The lap robes are given to the local nursing homes, and comforters are often given to the needy or victims of house fires.

The group dynamics surfaced as the quilters worked. They all declared that they had no appointed leader. Helen Nyhart, a member of the group, said that they had jobs for everyone: "... some cut; some thread needles because they don't sew, you see." It seemed that sewing skills were not a prerequisite for membership but willingness to work was required. After the three layers of the comforter were spread on the large table, and the top was smoothed out to everyone's satisfaction, five women stood ready to begin tying. The needle Threaders could not keep up. They had to have a runner to send the needles back and forth. They had agreed upon green thread (or cord) for the brown and peach blocks. Snatches of conversation could be heard:

"Let's tie in the middle [of each block]; it's easier to get through."

"Let me thread needles. I can do that."

"How long? About that long?" [Thread held out arm's length.]

"Not too long, and not too short."

Later it was suggested that the thread be longer because when using double thickness, it did not go very far. Again and again a needle would pierce the center of a block, and then it would be on to the center of the next. Other workers came along and snipped the cord on the seamline between the blocks and then tied it twice. When the flurry subsided, two women went over the ties again and made them shorter and uniform. The backing was two widths of cotton print brought forward over the edges to form the binding.

The quilting was all put away at noon and the group joined the senior citizens for the congregate meal. The group's "meeting" was held in the afternoon and followed the longtime tradition of telling a story for roll call, with a nickel penalty for lack of participation. Dues are one dollar. Helen Nyhart explained, "We don't know the depression is over—still give a nickel and pay a dollar." The women then played bingo, for which the designated hostess furnished prizes, and the group's members talked over business and shared club history.

Members recalled that the group originated from two rural
churches along U.S. Highway 59, and there were definite boundaries until the second generation began to marry and were welcomed even if they lived “out of the district.” Lois Stevens remembered getting married in 1940 and joining the group the week after her marriage.

In those days there might be fifty people at a club meeting, ten of which would be children. One lady recalled that at one meeting she served seven pies and five gallons of ice cream and the guests sat on ironing boards because folding chairs were not readily available. Members reminisced about gift showers and the piggy banks they gave expectant mothers. Lila Woods has been president since 1974 and writes about the club’s meetings for the local newspaper; for this the group receives a small payment.

Quilting was a major activity of the club for many years, and many surviving quilts testify to a high quality of work. Quilting died out for awhile, but in 1976 “we started quilting again. You know there was the time when you couldn’t give away a quilt. But some of them saved the tops and now we’re quilting again,” a member explained.⁴

That can be said for many groups. The skill continues to live on from generation to generation, influenced by current social values and technological changes. For example, at one time the iron-on embroidery transfers inspired quilters; today, many sources of patterns and kits and teachers inspire creativity in other quilting forms such as patchwork.

Ruth Meili lives in a historic home in the post rock town of Lincoln, Kansas. When Ruth married in 1924, her husband provided the quilt; he had won it at the Pleasant Valley Ladies Aid raffle.⁵ This was a group from the Presbyterian church in a rural community near Lincoln, and today Ruth is the keeper of the group’s record book.

The earliest records for the group show that dues were twenty-five cents in 1917, the next year they were raised to one dollar. The group could make a quilt for five dollars, according to the following expenses noted in the record book:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Cost</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 spools thread</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 yd. muslin</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 yd. muslin</td>
<td>2.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 yd. cotton</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Records suggest that the group was very busy in 1919. At least eight clamps were purchased so the group must have had two quilts in the frames and were paid for two quilts. The group had a balance of $12.95 in January of 1920.

The church ladies, understanding the Parable of the Talents in the Bible, invested their money in seven yards of gingham at forty-five cents a yard. With this they must have made a tied comforter since they also purchased seven yards of outing (flannel) at thirty-five cents a yard; forty-five cents worth of red yarn (for tying); and two spoons of thread. They must have felt a great deal of satisfaction when their efforts allowed them to hand the Reverend Johnston thirty dollars toward his salary; this money evidently was raised through the raffle of the comforter during a church social. It appears that the social was at least an annual event, but by 1943 the social was termed a “bazaar.”⁶

A group similar to the Pleasant Valley organization is the Altar Society of the St. Joseph Catholic Church at Olpe, a small town eleven miles south of Emporia with a German heritage. The lovely refurbished church has celebrated its centennial, and although the Catholic high school has closed, there is still a grade school which is the impetus for the quilters. They make quilts each year to be “given away” at their spring and fall festivals. At the April event, a Las Vegas night, a quilt is auctioned off at the end of the evening. At the fall
festival, bingo is played, and on the last game of "blackout" the winner receives a quilt.

In 1982 the Altar Society president suggested that quilting was the "in thing," and an invitation in the church bulletin to begin a quilting group brought a response. Marie Drier explained, "I volunteered to get it started." The quilters laugh about what is now referred to as the "practice quilt." "It had all kinds of stitches," said Marie, who remains the leader and keeps a scrapbook with pictures of each quilt, as well as photographs of those who have won the raffle quilts. Marie also handles the money, selects (with the help of friends) the designs for the raffle quilts, and decides which quilts to accept from outside groups or individuals. The Altar Society quilters have quilted fifty quilts for groups that want a quilt for their own fundraising project or for private individuals who wish to have a specially made quilt; some of these quilts are made from "scratch" while others are quilt tops or blocks that have not been backed and quilted.

The quilt work benefits the church, and those made for raffle cost the group about thirty-five to forty-five dollars for the materials. For two reasons they usually feature embroidered blocks: the blocks can be given to non-quilters to work on at home and pieced blocks turn out best when done uniformly by one person rather than by a group.

Every Wednesday afternoon the group meets for three hours in the corner room of what used to be the nuns' quarters. When researchers from the Kansas Quilt Project visited, the quilters were working on an old quilt—a 1920s or 1930s applique of gold and orange poppies outlining the area that would be near the edge of the mattress.

The group charges twenty-five cents per yard. This means per yard of thread used, giving a basis for the amount of quilting necessary on various quilts. The Olpe ladies were using J. P. Coats cotton-covered polyester thread on 250-yard spools. Only one spool was placed on the quilt top and then tossed back and forth as needles needed to be re-threaded. Parts of spools used are estimated. An average quilt probably brings fifty dollars.

The poppy quilt, in an old-fashioned quilting frame, tied at the corners to good solid wooden chairs, was obviously going to be more expensive. The quilters had worked for three weeks on it and did not have the outside edges started, nor the large center medallion. It was estimated that the quilt would take another three weeks to finish.

The quilt the ladies really liked to talk about was commissioned by a California man who had seen the group's work. It was decided that the quilt would be in the "Log Cabin" pattern in the colors requested by the gentleman, with gradations of tans and greens. The chimney (center square) was black, but other colors were tried first because the chimney changes the entire effect, depending upon whether it is dominate or recessive in the color scheme. It was quilted next to the seams and looked very puffy and elegant. For this commissioned work, the group was to charge for all labor and materials; the resulting value of the quilt was six hundred dollars.

When the quilters are asked to set together old blocks someone has inherited, Marie has the problem of setting the blocks together to make them "work"—the corner points meeting exactly—on old fabric that may be loosely woven or stretchy. Sometimes Marie must
decide that the blocks will never lay smoothly and, therefore, the group cannot work on it.

Marie, Rose Meier, and Alice Lutz are longtime quilters. When asked how they learned or at what age, Rose, in a firm voice, said, "When I was knee-high to a grasshopper." Alice, in her soft but confident voice, responded, "I always knew how." She cannot remember her first needlework but made most of the clothing over the years for her family of four daughters, sons, husband, and herself.

"Now, ten years ago," Alice said, "I swore off. I'm not going to make another dress! And I haven't. It got too hard." Alice was eighty-three years old at the time she was interviewed. She continued:

I tried to figure, count back over—I don't know how long, sixty years—how many quilts I might have made. A woman's life is never easy. I have two left and I'm hanging on to them! The rest I give to my children and grandchildren. I pieced and quilted them myself. It took a long time, a long time.

When asked if she quilted during the years that quilting was not a popular activity, Alice responded:

Well, yes, I did because I like the quilts, and I liked to quilt. But of course, when I had twin babies I didn't do any quilting. I forgot about that for quite awhile [laughter]. So after the children got bigger I started in again.

Asked what she gained from quilting that made her continue, she answered in a tone of satisfaction:

Oh, I don't know. Because I want them and I like to be busy. Instead of doing embroidery or crocheting; I can do that, too. And I use up the scraps, that's the idea!8

Rose Meier, age eighty-five at the time the interview started a nine patch quilt in February 1987 and finished it in December of that year. She had the Altar Society group quilt it. She said, "I was real happy with it. I had a lot of scraps from, oh, when I was a young girl, and my children were young, and the dolls. Some patches were pieces of dolls' dresses. . . . So I have a nice memory of years back."

Asked if she paid the group for its work on the quilt, she replied, "Well, I was happy—sure I paid them. They probably didn't charge me quite as much because she [Marie Drier] said, 'Oh, we used just a little over a spell, I'll let you have it for so-and-so.' Shall I tell how much?" At this point Marie Markowitz interjected, laughing, "When it comes to charging, we're not friends."

Rose continued, "Oh that was cheap enough, I'm telling you—all those stitches that were put in there. My quilt doesn't look like a nine patch because we didn't go around the blocks; we went through the white blocks [on the diagonal]." Marie Drier explained further that although the finished result looked more like "Irish Chain," it was indeed a nine patch quilt.9

The ladies in this quilting group feel some concern that they have not been able to interest younger women in the group's projects. When asked if the members see themselves as developing an appreciation for quilting and keeping it alive, the answers were varied. One remarked that everyone hoped to win the raffle quilts, but another felt that "you really have to make a quilt to appreciate it, but they [those who do not quilt] do appreciate them. Quilting is a fascinating thing. Once you take it up you always have a piece of fabric in your hand."

Asked if they felt a sense of loss when a quilt was given away, one woman responded: "Every one we've quilted is truly beautiful when we're done. Some are 'ugly' when we put them in [the frame] but are beautiful when we get done. The quilting enhances them so much." The reference to some of the quilts being "ugly" led the researchers to ask for a definition. One answer was "blah colors," and an example of a faded lavender and rose quilt was given.10

Stella and Grace Foutz of Abilene are the surviving representatives of the Willowdale Happy Hour Club, a group organized in about 1915 by farm women in a rural neighborhood near Abilene. The club met and quilted together whenever someone had a quilt that required members' help. Stella Foutz had a career taking care of newborn babies, and her sister Grace was a telephone operator. Both have produced a bounty of quilts. Grace recalled that there were many days without much happening at the telephone office so she would take her pile of pieces and stitch them on a portable sewing machine. The sisters' quilts, many worked on by the Happy Hour Club during the 1930s, are made with postage size pieces cut on the true grain: and in contrast
to the use of rotary cutters and to the practice of speed piecing practiced so often today, the Foutz sisters always pull threads in order to cut on the grain for their pieces.11

As the Kansas Quilt Project registered quilts at the Quilt Discovery Days, many from the depression years of the 1930s were seen. A quilting group that formed during those years was the Depression Club which was made up of farm women living northeast of Marion. The club began in 1933 when wheat was twenty-five to thirty cents per bushel, and the members joked that they would change the club's name to Prosperity Club when wheat went to eighty cents a bushel. The club reached that goal before it disbanded in 1937.

The Depression Club needed no officers. It was organized with the purpose to meet and quilt every two weeks in members' homes—wherever someone had a quilt ready in the frame. They would work on a quilt until it was finished and then go to the next one. Each member would bring a covered dish and would stay all day; the hostess usually furnished the meat dish for the meal. Elma Piper remembered the day that everyone brought a cabbage dish. It was past the garden season, probably early winter, when fresh cabbage was about a penny a pound at the store; everyone, being in the same general economic situation, brought some variation of cabbage slaw.12

The quilt project was interested in learning how people get introduced to quilting and what influences the directions individuals take in their particular styles and interests. For Pauline Reist of Bern, Kansas, interest began while she was in Omaha, Nebraska, babysitting with her cousin’s children in 1929. At that time she saw a quilt pattern that she liked in the Omaha Herald. Her cousin bought the material for her, and Pauline stamped the designs herself. Then her aunt taught her to quilt.13 A year later, after she had married, Pauline and her husband made a quilt together. Perhaps it was a good start on the fifty-eight years of togetherness they were celebrating when Pauline was interviewed by the project researchers.

By 1940, Pauline belonged to two clubs, both of which did quilting. She belonged to the S. U. Club for thirty years and never learned what the initials stood for. Pauline said that the members all had big families and helped the

By 1964, when this photograph was taken, the Pleasant Valley group had disbanded, with four of its members joining a quilting group in Lincoln. At left is Mary Panzer, a Pleasant Valley member.
meeting's hostess with whatever was needed—patching, mending, washing windows, or quilting. The other club was known as "H. H." for Helping Hands and it was for the most part a quilting club.

Pauline's big farm home could accommodate three full-size quilt frames in one room. Quilting was not just done on club meeting days but when friends dropped by in the evening; the ladies would quilt while the men visited. "Can't have idle fingers, you know," Pauline told the project researchers.14

For the quilt project Audrey Mueller of Sylvan Grove, Kansas, wrote of her start in quilting:

I joined the Oak Creek Club the same year my husband, Raymond Mueller and I were married—1946—and moved into the neighborhood. At one of the first meetings there was a quilt in the frame to be worked on. The hostess insisted that I try to quilt. I was a fairly good seamstress but I had never quilted. The members encouraged me to stay at it even though they must have known my stitches weren't as neat as theirs.

When it came time for me to have meetings at my home, I had them do other sewing. Several years later, I decided to make an appliqued "Sunbonnet Girl" quilt for their [her daughters] room using scraps of material that their dresses had been made of. The club helped me baste, cut, embroidery, and applique at several meetings before it was finished and then the Lutheran Dorcas Society quilted it since I had no room in my home for a quilting frame. Years later, both girls wanted one like it for their own and again the Oak Creek ladies helped with these blocks, but this time the prints were appliqued on with my sewing machine in a small zig zag stitch... These three quilts are treasures with all of the prints of our dresses of the 50s and 60s.15

During the 1970s quilts came into fashion as America celebrated its bicentennial with many groups and organizations creating or commissioning special quilts for the celebration. One of the special quilts Audrey remembers from this time period is the "Bear Claw" quilt which was partially quilted in her home by Oak Creek members. Perhaps, a more important quilt for her during the same decade was the "Oak Leaf" quilt:

... In the back of my mind for a long time there was this idea of an Oak Leaf quilt. Our farmstead was approximately 100 yards away from Oak Creek and oak trees were everywhere. So I went out and gathered leaves of various sizes and shapes, sat down and came up with a pattern of sorts and went back to our "boxes of scraps." Using off-white blocks, the four different color leaves met in the center with their tops in each corner. An acorn covered the stems in the center. I could not find the patience to hand applique these leaves on, so I machine quilted them on very neatly with the German-made machine my mother-in-law had given me.

... The quilting is in brown and looks very pretty on the back side with the pattern of oak leaf clusters and acorns along the border. This quilt is a real memento of my "Oak Creek Days" with the oak leaves, acorns, and scraps of material from clothes made for my family—even two pieces are from shirts I'd made for my husband and son.16

Among the other patterns that Audrey has quilted are the "Dresden Plate," which was machine appliqued, and the "Amish Star," which was made from more family scrap pieces. Of her other quilting projects, she noted:

I like all sorts of quilts—applique, piece and embroidered, but I do prefer handquilting to machine quilting. ... I plan to encourage our young ladies in the community to keep up the heritage of quilting just as my Oak Creek members did for me. No one is perfect at the beginning; it takes devotion and practice to be a good quilter.17

The Oak Creek Club was organized "early in 1935 as a Farm Bureau Unit, called "Farmerettes,"" Audrey explained that when Farm Bureau Units became Home Demonstration Units, "the Oak Creek Club dropped out and remained a social neighborhood group." Celebrating its fiftieth anniversary in 1985, former members brought their quilts and pictures to reminisce. Eleven members, all with ties to the rural Oak Creek area, continue to meet monthly. "Hand sewing and quilting are still the main projects," Audrey stated.18

The Sand Springs Social Club was similarly bonded by a rural neighborhood. Made up of members from the truck farms within a two to three mile radius just west of Abilene, the club has been in existence since the 1930s. A unique quilt created by the club is a friendship quilt made in 1956 to
honor the fiftieth anniversary of C. A. and Nina Madden. This quilt features the members' names embroidered in the center piece of each quilt block, and to symbolize the golden anniversary, a silky, damask type of fabric was used.18

The quilt project found that many quilts were given as markers of significant events, but they apparently were made as time permitted and were presented when the occasion arose. Patterns did not seem to be symbolic of the occasion being commemorated. In addition, the project found that quilts, designed specifically as a wedding or anniversary gift, are common for only the last fifteen years. Any made in an earlier time period to mark such events are much harder to identify today. This makes the anniversary quilt made by the Sand Springs club of even more importance since it is a commemorative quilt made at a time, the 1930s, for which there are few such quilts recorded by the Kansas Quilt Project.

Although the project in its research questionnaire asked quilters why they like to quilt, the answers were not very revealing. Although some said that quilting "passes the time" for them, usually the answer was simply "because I like to." Although there may be therapeutic value in quilting—life's concerns or frustrations ebb as the needle is pulled back and forth through the fabric—this was not verbalized, nor were the stimulation of socializing with others or the aesthetic influence of quilting.20 Perhaps those are intrinsic to the quilting groups and, thus, as far as the quilters are concerned, understood to be a part of the whole.

The quilters did, however, verbalize the feeling of satisfaction they gained when making a monetary contribution to a worthwhile project. The Kansas Quilt Project found several groups, representatives of many more it is believed, made up of older women who quilt to benefit their church or a number of church organizations in their communities. Some of these women quilt at senior citizen centers; some quilt for more than one church or organization. Several factors contribute to this active involvement by senior citizens: improved health care; society's recognition that these persons make a contribution; a desire on the part of the seniors to take part in community activities; and often times more financial independence than enjoyed by earlier generations.

Hazel Stowell spoke of the contribution the Methodist church ladies at Vermillion made to paint and carpet their church which has only eighty members.21 This group of women make and sell quilts to support special projects in their church; a small quilt is thirty-five dollars; a regular size, forty dollars; and a large quilt, forty-five dollars. In the local area are two very respected ladies, Sadie Waller of Seneca and Marjorie McDaniel of Centralia, who create and mark quilt designs. Their work allows the church ladies to concentrate on the quilting itself.22

By contrast, the Methodist ladies at Plainville, Kansas, have no set fee. Ruth Venters and the quilt owner "just kind of agree" on an amount that the owner feels is a suitable donation. It might be as much as one hundred dollars, but the average is more often between forty and fifty-five dollars.23

Whether a quilting group uses its skills to commemorate a special day or anniversary, contribute to a money-making cause, or gain personal satisfaction for its members, the group offers individual members many positive experiences. A sense of companionship, involvement, and sharing are among these. Although quilting as an activity may experience peaks and
valleys of popularity in Kansas, influenced by such factors as economic conditions, publications, contests and fairs, the art does not die. It continues to be passed from generation to generation. While the impetus for many groups may no longer be economic, personal satisfaction is still inherent in the skill. It remains a popular group activity, as evidenced by the numbers of groups and their members that have been located throughout the state by the Kansas Quilt Project.

NOTES

9. Interviews, Rose Meier and Marie Markowitz, June 22, 1988, KQP, KSHS.
10. Researchers' notes and interviews, KQP, KSHS.
11. Quilt # 1725, KQP, KSHS. This quilt, dated December 24, 1939, was signed by eighteen club members; the club made a friendship quilt for each of its members.
12. Quilt # F1257, KQP, KSHS.
13. Quilt # H118, KQP, KSHS.
14. Interview, Pauline Reis, July 7, 1988, KQP, KSHS.
16. Ibid; Quilt # T699, KQP, KSHS. Quilts are more apt to be quilted with white thread so the use of brown in the "Oak Leaf" quilt is unusual; the quilt is more unusual in that oak leaves and acorns are not traditional quilting motifs. The double use of fabric—here, material used to make family clothing later incorporated into a quilt—reinforces what we already know about many uses of fabric in quilts. This also shows that the quilt maker sewed for her family, later preserving memories of them through clothing used in quilts.
17. Audrey Mueller, "Reminiscence," KQP, KSHS.
18. Ibid.
19. Quilt # 40, KQP, KSHS.
20. Questionnaire responses, KQP, KSHS.
21. Quilt # D103, KQP, KSHS.
22. Researchers' notes and interview, Hazel Stowell, July 7, 1988, KQP, KSHS.
23. Researchers' notes and interview, Ruth Venters, June 26, 1988, KQP, KSHS.