SEW COMPLETE: TEXAS WOMEN QUILTING THROUGH THE HARD TIMES

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CHAPTER I

THREADING THE NEEDLE

EARLY AMERICAN

QUILTING

Quilts are utilitarian in their simplest form. They consist of a fabric top, a second piece of material for backing, and in between a layer of padding. All three components are held together by stitches.[1] The use of these unique bedcovers in America was born of necessity. The need for warm blankets and the lack of ready-made cloth combined to lead to the creation of the "pieced" quilt which made use of the scraps of material left from worn-out clothing.[2] To most of the women who made them, however, such homespun creations soon held a deeper artistic and emotional meaning.

Despite popular belief, the art of quilting did not originate in colonial America. In fact, the first quilts can be traced back to ancient Egypt.[3] Although the actual quilted material has never been recovered, a carved, ivory figurine of a pharaoh wearing a quilted mantle or robe dates

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[1]Jean Ray Laury, Quilts & Coverlets: A Contemporary Approach (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1970), 15.

[2]Pattie Chase, The Contemporary Quilt (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978), 8.

[3]Joel Horton, "Quilting: Piecing Together Past and Present, Traditional Quilting Takes a New Form," Texas Co-op Power 53 (October 1996): 8.

about 3400 B.C. The oldest actual quilt, believed to be from the first century B.C. and probably used as a floor covering, comes from Mongolia. It is by no means primitive, with quilting work that consists of elaborate spiral designs, as well as forms of trees and animals.[4] By the Middle Ages, people began using quilts for bedding. Researchers believe that the European Crusaders brought the technique back with them from the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries. By at least the thirteenth century, women in England were making quilts using wool, cotton, linen, and silk. In the seventeenth century, both China and India had discovered quilts.[5] And, in the seventeenth century, early women colonists brought quilting with them to America.[6]

The climate that greeted these new colonists in New England was very cold, which contributed to the utilitarian view of quilting. They were a logical choice for the colonists since the quilts' insulated design provided much-needed warmth. The colonists also recognized the economical benefit of quilts. As the supply of ready-made cloth became more scarce, the ability to use remnants of worn out

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[4]Susan Talbot-Stanaway, "American Quilts" (Lubbock, TX: Ranching Heritage Center, Education Division, 1983), 2, photocopied.

[5]Ibid., 3.

[6]Horton, "Quilting," 8.

clothing and other materials made quilts the practical choice for bedcovers.

Even though quilting allowed the colonists the chance to recycle old clothing and textile items, the demand for new fabric remained high and would ultimately give quilters more freedom in their work. At first, the colonists purchased textiles from England. English legislation and taxation soon drove the prices up, however, forcing the colonists to improve their own techniques of producing fabric.[7] Fabric production would not be such a difficult task for the colonists because while the colonists had been purchasing cloth from England, they had not been entirely dependent on it. Even from their earliest arrival, they had begun to make use of the raw materials available to them. They had access to hemp and wool and began spinning these materials and weaving them into a linen cloth to supplement the supplies from England.

Although coarsely made, the materials were a valuable asset because of their scarcity. The value placed upon raw materials and labor appears clear in records from the Probate Court of Suffolk County, Massachusetts from the years 1638 and 1639. The records indicate that "in 1638, . . . spinning wheels were valued at three shillings, and . . . in 1639, . . . quotes four yards of homespun cloth at

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[7]Elizabeth Wells Robertson, American Quilts (New York: The Studio Publications, 1948), 16.

six shillings, two pence-a little over double the price of the loom."[8] Despite the colonists' great need for these goods, weaving remained simply a craft conducted in private homes for several years. In 1640, though, William Rix became the first professional weaver in Massachusetts. He set up his own loom and people brought him wool, cotton, and hemp which he spun and wove into cloth. Rix had taken the first step toward industrialization of textile production in America. Other weavers soon followed his example. Government officials began appointing inspectors to fix prices for spinning and weaving, and "[t]he craft product had now passed into the industrial stage."[9]

From this beginning, the textile industry in America continued to flourish. Other colonies soon followed the example set by Massachusetts, and weavers began producing cloth throughout New England. Even though textile production continued to expand, the real growth of textile manufacturing did not come until much later when the mechanization of processes led from raw material to finished product. Francis Cabot Lowell established the first such factory in 1813, bringing spinning and weaving under one roof and under machine power.[10]

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[8]Ibid., 16.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Paula Mitchell Marks, Hands to the Spindle (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1996), 15.

In spite of all the advances, many families still could not afford ready-made cloth, and what they could afford usually was utilized first and foremost for clothing. Colonial families were therefore still forced to salvage scraps of material from worn out clothes (that could not be recycled for children's clothing) and old feedbags in order to have enough material to produce their necessary bedcovers. For several reasons, though, the creation of pieced bedcovers soon expanded beyond their strict utilitarian function and began to take on a new artistic and emotional purpose for the quilter, who started to make "an aesthetic rather than a practical choice."[11] They began to take the time to consider which colors would look best together. After this simple advance in design, artistically inclined women did not take long before they began to cut "scraps of cloth into specific shapes--squares, diamonds, triangles, octagons, hexagons, trapezoids,. . .--and to piece them together into increasingly intricate geometric designs."[12] The utilitarian need for the quilt remained prevalent, as some of these early geometric patterns included pieces of fabric that had been cut as small as an inch wide in order to utilize every last scrap of available material.

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[11]Chase, Contemporary Quilt, 8.

[12]Ibid.

Nearly all of these elements of design and expression can be witnessed in the earliest surviving America quilt. Although the exact quilter is unknown, the Saltonsall quilt was made in Massachusetts in 1704. It consists of silk, brocade, and velvet triangles.[13] Some of the patches of material probably came from one or more of the quilter's old dresses. Another element of early quiltmaking that is demonstrated in the Saltonsall quilt is the use of paper patterns. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, old paper goods, such as newspapers or letters, were often used as a guide by which to cut out the design for a quilt. Usually, the quilter left the paper in the quilt as an extra layer of insulation (yet another means of economizing). The Saltonsall quilt contains pages from the 1701 Harvard College Catalogue.[14] With its artistic pattern, personal touches and economizing elements, the Saltonsall quilt embodies what the craft came to mean for early American women.

Early quiltmakers, surrounded by a life that usually involved work from dawn to dusk, must have discovered a certain sense of relief in being able to create something beautiful with their own hands instead of the usual, day-to-day tasks of surviving in a rough land. They found inspiration for their geometric patterns in their immediate

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[13]Talbot-Stanaway, "American Quilts," 3.

[14]Ibid., 3-4.

surroundings, including nature, design patterns found on dishes and furniture, political themes (eagle, star), and the Bible.[15] The Bible probably had the greatest impact, which is indicated by the numerous quilt patterns with Biblical names, such as Jacob's Ladder, Walls of Jericho, and Star of Bethlehem.[16] Other designs, such as Log Cabin, Lone Star, and Birds in Flight, reflected the shapes and colors of the quilters' everyday surroundings. Of course, pattern names had regional roots, and therefore, some designs might be known by ten different names in various parts of the country.[17] Still, the patterns show that quilters considered their work more than just a utilitarian craft.

Besides creating intricate geometric patterns, quilters had other means of expressing their thoughts through their quilts. Perhaps the most meaningful was their inclusion of specific pieces of fabric in their quilts. As a means to preserve old memories,

> tiny bits of fabric from party dresses and Sunday bonnets, fair ribbons and beaus' neckties were saved and cherished for inclusion in a quilt top. The memories contained in those scraps of cloth were a link to longed-for faces and easier times.[18]

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[15]Laury, Quilts & Coverlets, 17.

[16]Horton, "Quilting," 8.

[17]Chase, Contemporary Quilt, 8.

[18]Suzanne Yabsley, Texas Quilts, Texas Women (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1984), 18.

The use of such scraps took on an even deeper meaning to family members who lived far away from each other. To these families, "[q]uilts, and the fabrics that comprised them, were a [connecting] lifeline."[19]

The Shaw family of Nebraska serves as a perfect example of the connecting force of quilting. The family had lived in New York from the early 1800s to the mid-1850s. By 1856, they had moved to Nebraska, leaving a married daughter behind in New York. Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, the women of the Shaw family sent each other scraps of special party dresses, new dresses, and entire quilt blocks. For these women, "fabric scraps and the quilts made from them were what photographs would be to a family today: they verified existence. . . . They were tactile communication and reassurance."[20]

Despite the emotional element to quilt design, quilters also had patterns which showed that the time involved in the craft could be "fun." The Crazy Quilt of the late nineteenth century "was a passing fad, that, for a short time, replaced the ordered quality of geometric pattern."[21] Unlike the earlier quilts that consisted of a set pattern that was usually constructed from whatever scraps could be

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[19]Elaine Hedges, "The Nineteenth-Century Diarist and Her Quilts," The Feminist Studies 8 (Summer 1982): 296.

[20]Ibid., 297.

[21]Edwin Binney, 3rd, and Gail Binney-Winslow, Homage to Amanda (San Francisco: R K Press, 1984), 72.

found, women created crazy quilts with pieces of silk and velvet dress fabric often embellishing them with the decorative embroidery work.[22] Similar to its earlier "pieced" counterpart, the Crazy Quilt also served as "the quilter's sentimental diary. It might include fabrics and memorabilia from neighbors or absent family members, and private messages known only to the maker."[23] Furthermore, since the Crazy Quilt consisted of irregularly shaped pieces arranged asymmetrically, the creator of such a quilt would be assured "a degree of originality and the possibility of creating a work of art."[24] Considering the fact that these quilts provided such a wide range of emotional and artistic outlet, it is little wonder that quilters were so taken with this fad. The quilters even relegated crazy quilts beyond the normal use of bedcovers. Whereas a normal pieced quilt was usually made to be used for warmth, women proudly displayed their creative, crazy quilts in their parlors as couch throws and in their guest rooms. The fad became so widespread that by 1882, a popular women's publication of the time, Dorcus Magazine, proclaimed "that no craze had so consumed American women as crazy patchwork."[25]

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[22]Norma Derry Hiles, "Crazy Quilts and Fancy Work: Icons of the American West," Journal of the West 33 (January 1994): 65.

[23]Binney and Binney-Winslow, Homage to Amanda, 72.

[24]Hiles, "Crazy Quilts," 66.

[25]Ibid., 65.

From the earliest simple quilts born out of the necessity to keep warm at night, to the more advanced geometric designs and eventually the Crazy Quilts of the late nineteenth century, "quilts have been the most visible contribution of women to American art."[26] Every quilter leaves behind a separate, personal history in each quilt that she creates. Their quilts reveal evidence of geography, economic and social conditions, age, skill, and a sense of who they are through their choice of color, fabric and design.[27] Although the first quilts made in America may have served only a utilitarian purpose, the desire of the quilter to add beauty to her surroundings helps account for the survival of the needle work as a craft form.[28] The desire for beauty is further expressed by the numerous accounts of women handing down their quilts through as many as five generations without the quilt ever being used.[29]

Thus, unlike the sewing of clothes, quilting evolved beyond the realm of necessary work and into a creative outlet of personal expression that allowed its creator to "transcend the limiting daily routine."[30] Furthermore, of all the domestic chores done by early American women, a

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[26]Chase, Contemporary Quilt, 8.

[27]Binney and Binney-Winslow, Homage to Amanda, 92.

[28]Laury, Quilts & Coverlets, 8.

[29]Chase, Contemporary Quilt, 9.

[30]Hedges, "Nineteenth-Century Diarist," 294.

completed quilt was one of the few items of which the finished product could be admired. Whereas, "[d]ishes washed became dirty; food cooked is consumed; a quilt endures."[31] Through exhibiting their quilts at county fairs and shows, this art medium, to a degree, "enabled women to compete and show off their skills as males did in the business world."[32] Quilts, then, became several things to the women who made them. Quilts allowed the women a form of recognition, expression, and a record of their past.

Beyond the personal satisfaction achieved in creating such "works of art," women also used quilting as a means of socializing. From the nineteenth century on, women made quilts to celebrate or record certain events, such as births, marriages, departures of children from home, and deaths.[33] Although many quilts were completed as an individual effort, often times, the necessity of quilting was turned into a party by means of the quilting bee. Quilting bees were elaborate affairs that involved not only the women quilters, but men as well. Usually, husbands arrived in the evening to take their wives home, but they did not leave immediately. The quilting party was followed by a huge dinner that had been prepared by quilters who were judged by their hostess as less skilled than the other

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[31]Ibid., 296.

[32]Hiles, "Crazy Quilts," 66.

[33]Hedges, "Nineteenth-Century Diarist," 296.

guests. Besides the meal, the guests played games, sang songs, and danced. These activities along with other aspects of the party, such as the guests' manner of dress, caused participants to view quilting bees as "the most important social event of the neighborhood [as well as] far more refined and 'genteel' than other gatherings such as the 'apple paring,' 'corn husking' or the 'thrashing,' because to it guests could wear their best Sunday clothes."[34] With all the participants dressed in their best clothes, and both men and women present, the quilting bee also offered a perfect opportunity for eligible young men and women to meet. A popular song from 1858 illustrates this point with the line, "[a]nd 'twas from Aunt Dinah's quilting party I was seeing Nellie home."[35]

Perhaps even more important than the meal and the male/female interaction of quilting parties was the chance they provided for the women to grow closer to one another. At the bees, women could create new friendships (or reinforce old ones), exchange ideas, share knowledge, and establish a cooperative spirit (especially in sparsely populated areas). These occasions were important enough "that one woman even confided to her diary concerning a quilting party to which

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[34]Robertson, American Quilts, 57.

[35]Kenneth W. Leish, ed., The American Heritage Songbook (New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1969), 48; quoted in Hiles, "Crazy Quilts," 65.

she was *not* invited."[36] The diarist's disappointment becomes more understandable upon closer examination of the actual interaction of the quilters. Not only did they exchange pleasantries and small talk, but they also shared confidences and gossip. Twelve women, three on each side of the quilt, began some nine feet apart. They talked loud enough for all to hear about the weather, crops, and politics. As they worked, however, and began to roll up the completed portions of the quilt, the distance between the workers decreased until they were face to face. Correspondingly, as the quilters moved closer to one another, their conversations became more intimate, and "many an individual reputation was made or marred."[37]

Intimate conversation was not the only aspect of the quilting party that excluded male participation. Women quilters "evolved cryptic vocabularies. . ., as satisfactory to themselves as were the fraternal rites of Masonic and Grange halls to their husbands."[38] The quilters' "code" included names for patterns, stitching, and even mistakes such as "rooster tail" for a knot that was showing, or "toenail hanger" for a stitch that was made too large.[39] Along with such special terms came many superstitions. One

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[36]Hedges, "Nineteenth-Century Diarist," 296.

[37]Robertson, American Quilts, 57.

[38]Binney and Binney-Winslow, Homage to Amanda, 10.

[39]Yabsley, Texas Quilts, Texas Women, 38.

such belief held that if an unwed girl completed an entire quilt by herself, she would never marry. Still others believed and participated in a "cat shaking." Once a quilt was finished, unmarried girls held onto the edges of the quilt when it was taken off the frame. A cat was set in the middle, at which time the girls shook the quilt, and the girl nearest to where the cat jumped to the ground would be the next to get married. Still another superstition said that every time a girl pricked her finger, she would receive a kiss for her wound.[40]

Even as industrialization lowered the prices of many ready-made goods, making quilting less necessary, the chance for social interaction continued to attract many women to the artform. Quilting circles still offered women a chance to leave behind the drudgery of housework for a while. They also created a public format in which the women could display work in which they took pride. Such benefits held especially true for the pioneer women to whom:

> . . . the quilting bee was significant in affirming the worth of women's work. Pioneer society was male dominated, and women's influence was, with few exceptions, confined to the family. Warm cover was essential; at quilting bees, women's skills and talents in the production of quilts were publicly recognized and acknowledged.[41]

Since women throughout the nineteenth century also were relegated to household chores just as the pioneer women had

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[40]Ibid., 47-48.

[41]Ibid., 14-15.

been, quilting bees continued to be an important source of public recognition of women's skills.

All of these elements combined to make quilting a significant part of the lives of the women who created them. Unlike the daily chores around the house, quilting provided a social outlet, and an acceptable means of emotional and artistic expression that was viewed as practical instead of merely as women's "fancy work." While the more emotional aspects of quilting held true for many of its participants, the importance of such outlets became especially significant for those women who experienced great hardships, such as the pioneer women, slave women, and women of the Great Depression. These groups of women faced tremendous workloads and extreme poverty. For them, quilting provided more than an acceptable pastime. The craft became a means to complete the aspects of their lives that were lacking due to the harsh conditions in which they lived. An examination of these groups within the state of Texas will provide further insight into the importance of the quilt.

First, for the pioneer women, quilting provided a reason to gather with neighbors who lived far away. Quilting bees provided one of the few opportunities for social interaction in a very sparsely populated area. Within the rugged life of the pioneers, "quilts sometimes became shields against the loneliness and fear that were an

inescapable part of their pioneer existence."[42] Quilts also served as one of the few decorative amenities in a pioneer home. Along similar lines, slaves viewed quilting as a means of artistic and emotional outlet. Besides the socializing of quilting parties, quilting took on another more private aspect for the slaves. Quilting provided a time for introspection and a chance to record one's thoughts. Since they were not allowed to keep records on paper, "slaves unconsciously left careful records of their emotional and psychological well-being on each surviving quilt."[43] Furthermore, quilting gave the slaves a chance to create artistic works that reflected the designs of their native culture. Finally, women in Texas during the Depression (especially those who lived in the region hit by the Dust Bowl) faced severe economic hardships that, at first, led to a return of making quilts from pure necessity. This trend, however, soon gave way to a sense of community spirit. Women formed community quilting clubs which were "an amplification of the old-time quilting bee. . . . and provided valuable practical and emotional support for members."[44] The clubs also offered actual economic support

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[42]Ibid., xiii.

[43]Gladys-Marie Fry, Ph.D., Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Ante-Bellum South (New York: Dutton Studio Books, 1990), 1.

[44]Yabsley, Texas Quilts, Texas Women, 36.

for its members by offering their quilting skills in exchange for a fee.

Through even a brief glimpse into the use of quilting by these Texas women, the importance of the "folk art" of quilting is evident. Quilting has spread across both cultural and generational lines. It has served as both a utility and a source of enjoyment. It is this sense of joy and pride among quilters that has propelled quilting into an artistic, emotional and social realm. To these women, the quilts they created are a demonstration of the valuable skills they possess, a demonstration of their worth.

CHAPTER II

SEWING CIVILITY:

TEXAS FRONTIER

WOMEN

The Anglo-American settlement of what is now known as Texas was a long and arduous process that began in 1821 when Stephen F. Austin's first colonists started their journey into what was then Mexican territory.[1] Due to the many barriers that existed in the Texas territory, however, the process of settlement would continue into the early 1900s.[2]

The earliest settlers began colonizing in the Gulf Coast region. The colonists were, at first, "struck by the fertility of the region."[3] With its fertile soil, ample rainfall, and moderate temperature, the area seemed ideal for supporting an agricultural venture. Unfortunately, while the conditions fostered a fertile agriculture base, they also promoted infestation by mosquitoes and flies and a variety of epidemics. Perhaps the worst of the epidemics was yellow fever. Mosquitoes transmitted the virus from one

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[1]Jo Ella Powell Exley, ed., Texas Tears and Texas Sunshine (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1985), 3.

[2]Betty J. Mills, Calico Chronicle (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1985), 8.

[3]David M. Vigness, The Revolutionary Decades, The Saga of Texas, 1810-1836, ed. Seymour V. Connor, (Austin, Texas: Steck-Vaughn Company, 1965), 36.

person to another, and in 1839, one-tenth of the population of Galveston died of the dreaded disease.[4] Colonists soon learned that those who were infected, yet managed to survive, would develop an immunity to it, and that the disease would dissipate with the onset of cold weather. These discoveries offered little help to the Gulf Coast settlers, however, as the region "always produced hordes of mosquitoes, rarely experienced frost, [and] had a constant stream of unexposed immigrants."[5] While the colonists had begun settlement with great expectations, they soon learned that life on the "fever coast," as it became known, was extremely difficult. Not only did epidemics of yellow fever, cholera, and dysentery plague the settlers, but they also had to fend off attacks by Indians and harassing Mexican authorities.[6]

Despite these hardships, movement inland did not proceed rapidly as this task presented even further problems. The first major problem of pressing inland was simply due to distance. Early on, without the advent of railroads in the area, the distance to supply sources was simply too great to induce settlement. Although a scattered number of military forts was eventually established, which

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[4]David G. McComb, Galveston: A History (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 93.

[5]McComb, Galveston: A History, 93.

[6]Exley, Texas Tears, 3.

encouraged a handful of brave pioneers to push forward, it was not until the rail lines became firmly established in the 1880s that settlement of the plateaus below the caprock and the north central portion of the state began in full force. Even then, settlement of the South Plains, or "West Texas," did not really occur until almost twenty years later.[7]

Of course, enduring through all of the tests and trials were the frontier women. In many regards, they faced even greater difficulties than did their male contemporaries. Along with everyone else, the women faced an unhealthy environment including a poor diet, outbreaks of cholera and various fevers. Added to these obstacles, however, the women also had to contend with the dangers of childbirth. For women of childbearing ages, mortality rates were very high due not only to inadequate medical care, but also to the hard work and frequent moves involved in settling a frontier.[8]

Unfortunately, the hardships did not merely end with illness and lack of medical attention. As historian Ann Patton Malone states, "[m]any women left reminiscences which express feelings of utter loneliness, even terror, in their

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[7]Mills, Calico Chronicle, 8.

[8]Ann Patton Malone, Women on the Texas Frontier: A Cross-Cultural Perspective (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1983), 10.

little cabin homes, miles from their closest neighbors."[9] This feeling of isolation resulted from the more typical "nature of Anglo settlement which tended to be nuclear and scattered rather than organized by family groups, communities, or presidios."[10]

In addition to this problem, the pioneer women had to endure the frequent, and often extended, absences of their husbands, and or heads of household. Men on the Texas frontier were often called away to fight battles with Indian tribes and eventually in the war for Texas independence. To make matters worse, during these absences, the women were often forced to fend off marauding Indians, Mexican authorities, and wild animals on their own. Pioneer Fannie Beck left one such account describing the night her parents were called away to tend to the funeral arrangements of a cousin who had been mortally wounded during an Indian attack. Beck and her brother, Milton, who were themselves, "not grown-ups by a good many years,"[11] were left in charge of five younger siblings. Although their house was isolated from the main part of town, Beck recalled that her parents reassured the children that, "there was no danger of the Indians that night because they would be far away

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[9]Ibid., 18.

[10]Ibid., 17.

[11]Fannie Davis Veale Beck, "On the Texas Frontier," in Texas Tears and Texas Sunshine, ed. Exley, 187.

escaping the vengeance of the posse out after them."[12] The words provided the children with little comfort. As Beck remembered:

> We nailed quilts up in the windows and stuffed rags into the cracks so that no light could shine through. We all slept in one room; that is, the others slept. Milton and I kept vigil by the fire, listening to every sound, imagining that every little noise we heard came from the terrible savages stealing upon us to massacre us. We suffered an agony of fear every time Sue, the baby, stirred; for we didn't want her to cry and let the Indians know there was a houseful of unprotected children for them to pounce upon.[13]

Fortunately, Beck's parents returned in the morning. Beck was so relieved that she threw herself into her mother's arms and "cried with joy that we were safe, and all was well."[14] Although Beck's night passed without incident, her fears were not unwarranted as there are many more accounts in which the participants were not as fortunate.

Perhaps the most consuming obstacle faced by the frontier women, however, was one that encompassed not only the threat of Indians and illness, but also the need to provide for the spiritual as well as the physical well-being of their families, in other words, to uphold the Victorian social system. The first generation of pioneer women found this task to be an almost impossible one. Many of the genteel ways they had been taught as young ladies did not

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[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid.

fit into a frontier life where one's health, not one's manners, became the primary concern. Yet, these women were determined to conquer their new surroundings. They "came to view themselves as civilizers and felt obligated to bring gentility, culture, and beauty to the raw life of the frontier."[15] Nowhere is this diligent attempt at achieving culture more clearly visible than in the quilts created by these early pioneers.

Despite the hardships they endured, the pioneer women still found pleasure in the "chore" of quilting. On one hand, this craft was a necessity since materials were scarce and the need for warmth was great. As early Texas settler Mary A. Maverick has recounted, "The first Norther I ever experienced was a terrific howling north wind with a fine rain blowing and penetrating through clothes and blankets--never in my life had I felt such cold. . . ., two of our horses froze to death in a norther."[16] Certainly many pioneers had experienced the same conditions. Mrs. Odessa Wilman, a native of West Texas, revealed a similar sentiment in a 1974 interview. Wilman remembered the stories that her mother had told of moving onto the High Plains in 1890 stating, "She got to worrying about freezing to death in

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[15]Malone, Women on the Texas Frontier, 19.

[16]Mary A. Maverick, Memoirs of Mary A. Maverick, ed. Rena Maverick Green (San Antonio: Alamo Printing, 1921), 14-15.

the winter. She used to laugh when she told it, how you never saw anyone quilt so fast in your life."[17]

Even though there was a tremendous need to create quilts for warmth, the pioneers had no easy task in obtaining the materials needed to complete such a large household item. The fact that they did create often elaborate works of art shows the ingenuity, skill, and artistic talents that these women possessed. This fact becomes even more apparent when considering accounts such as this one told by Betty J. Mills in Calico Chronicle:

> One nostalgic story told of an isolated woman whose dress became so shabby and had been mended so much that her husband traveled a dangerous 100 miles by horseback to reach a settlement with a store that had piece goods, where he was able to buy a length of calico for a dress for his wife.[18]

Mills's story shows the scarcity of material and the importance of patchwork skills. Of course the alternative to buying ready-made goods was for the pioneers to make their own cloth. As Mills points out, however, "[i]t took almost two weeks of steady earnest labor to spin enough thread for a dress, then another week to weave the fabric . . . ., [and that] the sewing machine was. . . generally

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[17]Mrs. Wilman, Interview by Patricia Cooper and Norma Bradley Buferd, summer 1974; quoted in Patricia Cooper and Norma Bradley Buferd The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1977), 20-21, 24.

[18]Mills, Calico Chronicle, 18-19.

not in use in Texas until after the Civil War."[19] The amount of labor involved in simply creating a piece of fabric clearly illustrates that the pioneer women highly prized the art of piecing, or quilting.

Later in her work, Mills goes on to describe a skirt that "had either worn out or served double-duty by offering length that could be recycled as an apron or a little girl's dress or a little boy's shirt. In some cases, no doubt, the skirt was worn until the brightness was gone and was then discarded."[20] Obviously, Mills had forgotten about the "rag or scrap bag" that the frontier women kept to make patchwork quilts. Nothing was ever "discarded" on the frontier. Even a one-inch-square scrap (sometimes even smaller) would be worked into the "tapestry" of a patchwork quilt. The piecing process allowed a resourceful woman to stretch the use of a piece of fabric and the money spent on it. A piece of material would often begin as goods to make an item of adult clothing, but after much wear would be cut down to create a child's garment, then an apron, and then the last scraps would be used to piece a much needed bedcover, providing warmth, comfort, and often the only decoration found within a house on the frontier.[21]

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[19]Ibid., 19.

[20]Ibid., 68.

[21]Tommy Morman, interview by author, 20 June 1997, Lubbock, Texas, tape recording.

The settlers provided further evidence of the importance of quilting through their inclusion of quilting items as necessities that they would need on their long journey to Texas. Mary A. Blakenship, who came to the West Texas frontier in 1901, remembered:

> During the fall of 1901, we started the job of turning everything outside of the bare necessities into cash and choosing between the unnecessary and the indispensable. . . . After several months of discrimination, we had our belongings trimmed down to fit into a 14-foot wagon. . . .[22]

Among the belongings that the Blakenships considered "indispensable" were a bed, clothing, home canned fruit, sugar, flour, meal, coffee beans, home cured meat and planting seed, crockery milk vessels and churn, and quilting frames.[23]

Blakenship was not alone in counting her quilting supplies among her necessities. Similarly, Mrs. Odessa Wilman recalled the stories that her mother had told her of their family's journey to West Texas in 1890 from Springfield, Missouri. She remembered her mother talking "about starting out in a covered wagon with one bedstead and a lamp given to them by her mother, and all the quilts she

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[22]Mary A. Blakenship, The West is for Us: The Reminiscences of Mary A. Blakenship, ed. Seymour V. Connor (Lubbock: West Texas Museum Association, 1958), 21-22.

[23]Ibid.

had made for her hope chest."[24] On that same journey, Wilman recalled that:

> Mama had her piece bag with her on the whole trip and was working on this Star of Bethlehem I have here. Later I came to call it the Lone Star when I made it. She was still working like she used to at home with little tiny fine pieces out of that quilting bag. By the time she got to the edges of the star she was piecing from our worn-out clothes and work clothes with a little bit of fabric thrown in from when Dad got to town and could afford some yardage.[25]

The tales that Wilman relates about her mother's quilting clearly illustrate the importance of quilting to this pioneer family. Not only does Wilman's mother demonstrate the pleasure she derived from quilting by using it to occupy her thoughts on a long, arduous trip, but Wilman herself shows a sense of pride in her mothers work first by recalling the "little tiny fine pieces," and next by emulating her mother's work with her own Lone Star quilt.

While creating quilts provided the pioneer women with the warm bed covering they needed, quilting represented much more to the women who made them. Quilting gave these women a chance to create something of beauty, a chance to express themselves. Wilman remembered the artistic designs found in her mother's work:

> Mama's best quilts were her dugout quilts because that was when she really needed something pretty. She made a Butterfly and a Dresden Plate and a Flower Basket during those two years in the dugout. She started the

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[24]Mrs. Wilman, Interview by Cooper and Buferd; quoted in Cooper and Buferd The Quilters, 21.

[25]Ibid., 22.

> Butterfly in that first dust storm all alone. . . . The Butterfly was free and fragile. It was the prettiest thing she could think of. She knew I was coming along and the Butterfly was for me.[26]

Wilman's story reveals how her mother used the art of quilting to alleviate her feelings of desolation brought on by the austere surroundings that she found upon moving to the West Texas frontier.

To Wilman's mother, the quilts she made served as one of the only decorations that she had in her small, dark, little home. Because of her humble surroundings, she chose "fanciful" patterns to brighten her surroundings. Other quilters used their skills to express themselves in slightly different ways. Fannie McIntyre met her husband in Driftwood, Texas in 1911. She remembered how scarce materials were when they were first married. Her husband smoked Duke's tobacco that came in little cloth sacks, and as McIntyre recalled:

> [I]t was hard times and things was scarce. I didn't want to throw all them little sacks away because they was good material--unbleached domestic. So I saved enough of 'em to make a quilt. I had to rip the seams out and wash 'em and iron 'em. . . . I dyed 'em three colors--pink and green and yellow. . . It made a pretty quilt. My husband kept sayin','Why I wouldn't fool with them things if I was you. That's too much trouble.' But after he seen what I done with 'em, he was kinda pleased about it.[27]

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[26]Ibid., 24.

[27]Suzanne Yabsley, Texas Quilts, Texas Women (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1984), 46.

In turning the art of "making do" into its own artform, McIntyre was not alone. Tommy Morman, a West Texas native, shared similar memories of Geniveve Thomas Pritchett, her great grandmother of Spur, Texas. Of Pritchett's quilts, Morman recalled:

> Sometimes it was the only cheerful thing in their households as far as it gave them a little color. And people think that everything was drab colors many years ago, but it wasn't. You can see in this one [quilt] the major colors are a real pretty pink, some greens and blues that blend real well. And that was one thing they learned,. . .figuring out which patch of material to use in what block to come up with a good combination that's going to complement one another. And you can't tell me that these ladies weren't real artists because that definitely is a trait that probably is inborn.[28]

Besides recognizing the normal artistic expressions of color and composition choice, Morman went on to describe the other expressive qualities found in the art of piecing. She stated:

> And these quilts were precious to them just simply because, every time they looked at these quilts, each one of these pieces of material represented something in their lifetime. That dress they would say, 'Oh, I remember that. You know, we had a special family gathering, and we wanted something new, and we were able to get a piece of material. And this was aunt so and so's, and this was my mother's old dress or, you know, one of the children.' And it was just a memory bank really of their lifetime.[29]

Morman expanded on the ideas of "expressive quilting" as she compared the work of her maternal and paternal grandparents. According to Morman, her mother's mother and

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[28]Morman, interview by author, 1997.

[29]Ibid.

her father's mother had distinctly "different ideas about patterns."[30] She stated:

> I remember when I look at them, one grandmother was not as cheerful, I guess, as the other grandmother and she used darker colors. And, I can tell the period in their life that things were going good, and they were happy because it was always a bright cheerful color. And if it was some old, dark something, it might have been in the winter time or something, and I don't know, it just sort of reflected to me what was happening in their life, or the times, or how things were going at the time.[31]

Morman clearly viewed these creations as an extension of the quilter, recognizing not only the talent used to create an eye pleasing design, but also the ability to express ones thoughts and emotions.

Likewise, Mary Frances Nunley Ricketts, the daughter of an early West Texas quilter, remembered the quilts that her mother had pieced together with admiration. She recalled fondly:

> . . . especially those pieces that I can remember Mother wearing the dress that it came from. There was a little navy blue with a little pink rose in it that I just oh thought that was the prettiest thing that I'd ever seen. I'd just look at it.[32]

Ricketts reminisced about another special quilt her mother made as she recalled:

> She made a quilt one time out of Daddy's ties, a quilt top.You know, you can take those ties and rip 'em open

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[30]Ibid.

[31]Ibid.

[32]Mary Frances Nunley Ricketts, interview by author, 14 March 1997, Lubbock, Texas, tape recording.

> and press'em, and you can get some pretty strips of silk and she'd make the strip quilt out of these ties of Daddy's. I know she had to wait. I think she got one of his favorite ties, and we had a little defugilty [sic] in the family. . . . It preserved the ties. There was a little story to each tie you know. It had a place of honor in the linen closet.[33]

Through these stories, Ricketts has illustrated not only her own sense of pride in her mother's "handiwork," but also, the level of importance that quilting held as an artform to this particular quilter. Surely, someone who was just making a warm bed covering would not risk a family feud to obtain a mere piece of fabric.

Another account illustrates a different aspect of the artistic importance that quilting held for the frontier woman. Anne Long Tuley, the great-granddaughter of quilter Gail C. Worden, related a story about the quilting done by Worden in the 1850s. Tuley had been told of how her great grandmother Worden would "quilt with her neighbors many days as long as they could."[34] Yet Worden's quilting group had one member that could not quilt to suit the others, and the ladies thought of ways to discourage her from quilting without hurting her feelings. Surely to these women quilting had become a craft of artistic importance, not merely a chore to be completed by the most expedient means possible. In fact, to many of these early quilters, this

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[33]Ibid.

[34]Karoline Patterson Bresenhan and Nancy O'Bryant Puentes, Lone Stars: A Legacy of Texas Quilts, 1836-1936 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 42.

"handicraft" had become such an important channel of expression that even some of the men began to use quilting as an expressive medium. J. B. Roberson of Cleburne, Texas completed a quilt in 1893 as a demonstration of his love for his family. The quilt is a type of family tree, listing births, deaths, and marriages. Considering the difficulty in creating such a quilt, Roberson clearly took great pride in honoring his family in such a manner.[35]

In addition to these accounts, the fact that quilting provided the pioneer women with something more than merely a warm bed covering is evident in their descriptions of their leisure activities. As Mary A. Blakenship recalled, "[o]ur rainy days. . . [w]e worked at cording cotton batts, quilting, patching, and tall tale swapping."[36] Even more important for the early settlers, however, were the quilting parties, or quilting bees as they were often called. These parties provided the quilters with a chance to enjoy the art of quilting, a rare chance at public recognition of the skills they possessed, and the much needed chance to socialize on the isolated frontier.

The prospect of a quilting party in Watterson, a farming community in Bastrop County in the late nineteenth century, brought such excitement that even the men would

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[35]Ibid., 110.

[36]Blakenship, The West is for Us, 71.

rearrange their workload in order to participate. As historian Deed L. Vest relates:

> . . . word would be dispatched about the community that a quilting was to take place on a certain day. All the neighboring women, and such men as could so arrange their work, would respond to the invitation, both in order to assist their friends, and to take advantage of the fun and relaxation thus afforded. . . . Food in plentiful abundance was prepared for the big meal to be served at noon. . . . While the quilting. . . was in progress the men, who had accompanied their wives, busied themselves pitching horse-shoes and playing dominoes, checkers and mumble-peg. . . .[37]

Obviously in this community, the quilters were not the only ones who enjoyed the benefits of holding a quilting party.

A similar account of a quilting party is provided by yet another male, C.C. Cox. Cox, who returned from the Texas Navy in the mid-1800s, fondly recalled the details of a quilting held shortly after his return:

> . . .the work begins on all sides. The gents on the ground are expected to roll up the sides as fast as needed, to pass the thread and scissors--and with anecdotes and small talk to entertain the workers. In the meantime things are getting hot in the Kitchen, the biggest Turkey on the place is basting. . . . Pies and cakes. . . . Chickens, Eggs, Butter, Milk, Preserves, . . . all gather in and take their place. . . . At last the wonderful quilt is finished--the frames are removed, the Table spread, the Company all in, and joy unconfined rules the hour. . . [38]

As if these festivities were not enough of a celebration, Cox continued his tale remembering a dance following the

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[37]Deed L. Vest, "Watterson: A Texas Rural Community" (Master's Thesis, Texas Tech University, 1946), 6, 69-70.

[38]C.C. Cox, "Reminiscences of C.C. Cox," The Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association 6 (July 1902-April 1903): 119, 127-128.

meal, and that the guests did not depart until after breakfast that next morning. Cox's enthusiasm in relating the story of this quilting definitely demonstrates the pleasure that these early Texans derived from such an event.

Although not less important to the party's participants, Mary Frances Nunley Ricketts recalled a few less elaborate affairs that her mother attended in the mid-1900s. Ricketts remembered:

> They'd have what they called the quilting bees. Mother'd always worry about the refreshments she was going to serve, you know, if she'd have enough, or if they'd like it. . . and I can just hear her mumbling to herself as she was trying to get the refreshments ready for the quilting bee. Mother thought everybody should do their best. . . . They did that [quilting bees] mostly in the winter time when they couldn't work in the garden and that kind of thing, and oh, maybe Mother'd have [host] it three times during the winter time.[39]

The host's worry over the refreshments in this account definitely suggests the value such events held in the frontier social life. The social value of "quiltings" is emphasized as well by Mrs. Beaulah Foster, who was born in Ralls in 1891. Foster remembered:

> We went to party quilting all the time. . . . [We] mostly went in afternoons--if stay all day carry a covered dish. It was real interesting. Everybody looked forward to it. We had just as good a time in our way as the women do today. I enjoyed it just as much as going out to some of the nice things they have today.[40]

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[39]Ricketts, interview by author, 1997.

[40]Mrs. Beaulah Foster, interview by Georgellen Braunschweig, 15 March 1981, Ralls, Texas, tape recording, Southwest Collection, Lubbock, Texas.

Perhaps an even more convincing story is the one told by Luvenia Roberts. Roberts had married a Texas Ranger in 1875 and spent six years in a Ranger Camp in Menard County where her husband was stationed. She recalled that social gatherings were seldom held on the frontier. This lack of social pleasure made participants appreciate the gatherings even more. Roberts remembered:

> I recall spending a very enjoyable day at a quilting bee. While the fingers plied the needle, tongues were equally busy. At noon all repaired to the dining room, which served as a kitchen. The table groaned under the burden of rations tempting to the appetite. The feast lasted as long as we were there. When twilight began to fall the young men gathered in for a dance. And a dance it was. . . . The dance lasted until daylight.[41]

Roberts ends her tale with a hint towards the importance of such an event on the frontier stating, "[m]any came from long distances, and then it was an Indian country."[42] With this statement, Roberts reveals that the quilting bee was such a source of enjoyment that some people were even willing to risk their lives in order to attend. Clearly such accounts illustrate that these gatherings provided a much needed chance to socialize that, in the end, also had produced a useful, and necessary household good.

In addition to the chance to socialize, and produce useful items, quilting provided these women (and men) with a

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[41]Luvenia Conway Roberts, "A Woman's Reminiscences of Six Years in Camp with the Texas Rangers," in Texas Tears and Texas Sunshine, ed. Exley, 193-194, 198-199.

[42]Ibid., 199.

sense of pride. They took pride in the skills used to create a quilt under such harsh conditions, and they took pride in their artistic accomplishments. The story of Mathilda Doebbler Gruen Wagner illustrates this sense of pride almost perfectly. Wagner lived a very difficult frontier life. She was born in 1856 in Fredericksburg. She lost her mother as a small child and spent most of her life in a constant struggle, trying to earn enough money to survive. Even after she had married for a second time and life finally had become easier, Wagner still valued an honest day's work. At age eighty-one she stated, "Since I broke my hip I cannot get around so well but I can still piece quilts and I love to."[43] Even at age eighty-one Wagner proudly valued the skills that she possessed.

Sometimes it was not the quilter herself who expressed pride in her work, but the quilter's husband or child. Similar to the work ethic exhibited by Wagner in her quilting work, June West Martin (a quilter from Texas herself) demonstrated equal pride in her grandmother's work when she recalled:

> My grandmother, Hellen Drury West, lived in this part of harsh South Texas while most of it was brushland. The family milked cows for a living, and water was hauled from a well several miles away in the back of a wagon. My grandmother quilted and pieced quilts that she sold

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[43]Winfred Cade, ed., "I Think Back: Being the Memoirs of Grandma Gruen," in Texas Tears and Texas Sunshine, ed. Powell Exley, 107-108, 123.

> to help make a living to raise seven children. She received $1.50 to $2.50 per quilt.[44]

In another example of family pride, one quilt has been passed down through four generations. The McClanahans moved to Texas in 1846 to take advantage of the liberal homestead policy then in effect. Dorothea McClanahan made the quilt, a Rambling Rose pattern, for her daughter Nancy as a wedding present with the intention that it be handed down to the oldest child of each generation. Following her mother's wishes, Nancy left the quilt to her son Eugene. Eugene passed it on to his son Sam, and Sam passed it down to his daughter Rosa. As the compilers of the official catalog for the Texas Sesquicentennial Quilt Association's traveling exhibit soon discovered, the "sense of family responsibility for the beautiful creation of a long-ago relative [was] still strong--Rosa'a son, Raymond, brought the quilt to the Corpus Christi Quilt Day even though his mother was out of town, saying, 'I knew I needed to bring this. Mom would want to share it.'"[45]

In other accounts, the children of the quiltmaker expressed their pride toward the quilter in various ways. Frieda Dailey of Austin remembered how she and her siblings felt about their mother's quilts:

> We always thought that all the quilts she made were pretty. And us kids would stand around and watch while

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[44]Bresenhan and Puentes, Lone Stars, 112.

[45]Ibid., 48.

> she was quilting. I'd see a piece of fabric in the quilt and I'd say, 'Oh, this was my dress.' And my brother would say,'Well, that's my shirt.' And my younger sister would come along and say, 'This is my dress here, and that's my bonnet over there.' We always looked to see who had what in the quilt. It tied you together somehow.[46]

Dailey's story demonstrates not only a pride in her mother's work, but is also a testament to the importance that quilting played in the family history at a time when photographs were not common place.

In another account, Mary Frances Nunley Ricketts exacted pride from the role that she herself played in helping her mother complete a quilt. Ricketts was born in Lubbock in 1914 and lived there until her death in 1997. She recalled:

> Mother would take her pieced quilt top, and well at first, she would put the lining in and of course it would be upside down and tacked on this wooden frame. And then she'd put the cotton batting down on the lining and I remember helping her. She'd have me hold it at one end while she stretched it to the other end, you know, and I felt so big. I was pre-school age. I don't really remember how old I was, but anyway, I was old enough to help her a little bit.[47]

Likewise, Tommy Morman demonstrated the pride she felt for her grandmother's work as she explained:

> These quilts that are on this rack, these two. . . my mother's mother quilted these. . . . If you can't tell from the front how good the stitching is, it always shows up on the back because the back's got to be as fine as stitching as the front to be considered a piece of good work. And the ladies that quilt, everyone of them, you know, I guess have probably a little different

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[46]Yabsley, Texas Quilts, Texas Women, 47.

[47]Ricketts, interview by author, 1997.

> stitch, but they're all very precise, even, and that's difficult. That means you've got to do it on a regular basis or you're never going to have that consistency.[48]

Morman showed the quilts proudly to illustrate just what she meant by "fine stitching." She continued to demonstrate her pride by describing the sense of loss she felt when an aunt sold the quilts made by her paternal grandmother. Morman explained:

> She slipped up and told me she sold 'em, and I said, 'You did what?' She says, 'Well, there weren't enough to go around for all the grandkids to have one apiece.' And I said, 'Some of us grandkids would have been very willing to give up their quilt just to keep it in the family. . . I can't believe you did that.'. . . I was just so shocked. I just couldn't believe. . . it was just like selling part of our heritage to me. . . . She kept them for years, and then she found out that people were paying thousands of dollars for these old quilts, and that's why she sold them."[49]

Morman's despair at the loss of her family "treasures" provides strong evidence that quilts are highly valued as family heirlooms.

Clearly these quilts held value for not only the quilters, but their families as well. Obviously the frontier women had managed to use the art of quilting to help bring, as Ann Patton Malone has stated, "gentility, culture, and

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[48]Morman, interview by author, 1997.

[49]Ibid.

beauty to the raw life of the frontier."[50] As West Texas quilter Mary White concluded:

> Sometimes you don't have no control over the way things go. Hail ruins the crops, or fire burns you out. And then you're just given so much work with in a life and you have to do the best you can with what you got. That's what piecing is. The materials is passed on to you or is all you can afford to buy. . . that's just what's given to you. Your fate. But the way you put them together is your business. Piecing is orderly.[51]

In the end, as White's statement demonstrates, the quilts had given the pioneer women a sense of order within the uncertainty of a frontier existence, a sense of purpose to provide for the physical well-being of their families, and a sense of beauty that provided a level of emotional support to all members of the household. These women, with their skill, talent, and determination played a vital role in the creation of the state of Texas. Truly they have established a place of worth in the history of the state.

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[50]Malone, Women on the Texas Frontier, 19.

[51]Mrs. Mary White, Interview by Patricia Cooper and Norma Bradley Buferd, summer 1974; quoted in Patricia Cooper and Norma Bradley Buferd The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1977), 20.

CHAPTER III

PIECING TOGETHER FREEDOM: TEXAS SLAVES AND QUILTING

When remembering the early days of Texas, stereotypical images quickly spring to mind of cowboys, cattle drives, and open ranges. These often romanticized scenes, however, do not complete the picture. In order to achieve a true picture of Texas history, one must add to these images a "landscape of plantations and cotton fields, and the roles of master and slave."[1]

Even though slavery as an Anglo-American institution had a relatively brief history in Texas (it lasted less than fifty years), by the 1850s the population ratio of slaveholders to slaves in Texas was comparable to that of Virginia. In this sense, slavery was as strongly established in Texas as it was in the Union's oldest slave state.[2] The rapid entrenchment of the "peculiar institution" into the state demonstrates the initial importance of slaves as an inexpensive labor force. It does

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[1]John Michael Vlach, "Afro-American Folk Crafts in Nineteenth Century Texas," Western Folklore 40 (April 1981):149.

[2]Randolph B. Campbell, An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 1-2.

not, however, illustrate the cultural impact that these African-Americans wielded on Texas traditions and society.

All too often, slaves are portrayed as being capable of only "simple tasks requiring brute strength or endurance."[3] In reality, though, slaves established their own roles as skilled craftspersons, creating their own form of folk art. Through the use of daily skills, such as sewing and carpentry, the slaves established a creative outlet that not only enabled them to produce the goods that they needed to live, but helped them cling to the sense of pride that they needed to survive. This spirit is clearly illustrated through the folk craft of quilting.

Slave women created quilts that blended African ethnic designs with American traditions. One of the best examples of this is the string quilt, a creation in the tradition of the American patchwork quilt. Scraps are used to provided the needed material, but the general design is different. The string quilt uses longer, less uniform pieces of fabric, and is made in a strip pattern that closely resembles West African textile designs.[4] In addition to creating new "blended" designs for themselves, slave quilters who received the task of sewing quilts for the plantation owner often disguised elements of African mythology within their

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[3]Vlach, Afro-American Folk Crafts, 150.

[4]Ruth Winegarten, Black Texas Women: 150 Years of Trial and Triumph (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 21.

patterns. For example, slaves used intricate flower patterns as symbols of Erzulie, the Vodun goddess of love, and the snake motif symbolized Damballah, the West African god of fertility.[5]

Quilting provided fulfillment even beyond this means of expression for as historian Ruth Winegarten states, "[s]lave women suffered under the double burden of racial and sexual oppression."[6] This oppression included a full day of field work with the women returning home after dark to cook and clean for their own families, as well as, complete any additional chores assigned by the master such as spinning thread or weaving cloth. In other words, slaves had to quilt on their "free time," which usually meant at night or on Sundays. Generally, only Sundays, the Fourth of July, and Christmas week were guaranteed as days off.[7] The fact that slave women continued to create quilts in spite of these burdens clearly illustrates the importance of this artistic medium. However, the pleasure of quilting extended far beyond this artistic expression.

In addition to serving as an expressive outlet, quilting also provided the slave women with the comfort of social interaction. Slaves would often organize quilting

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[5]Gladys-Marie Fry, Ph.D., Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Ante-Bellum South (New York: Dutton Studio Books, 1990) 7.

[6]Ruth Winegarten, Black Texas Women, 15.

[7]Campbell, An Empire for Slavery, 254.

bees and quilting parties. Although the parties afforded a greater opportunity for sheer enjoyment, the women worked together at both events to produce articles of value for the whole community. Gatherings such as these allowed the women to develop a sense of cohesion, and as historian Jacqueline Jones has observed, ironically, "the threads of cotton and wool bound them together in both bondage and sisterhood."[8]

Evidence of the significant role quilting played in the lives of the slaves is found in abundance in interviews conducted by employees of the Federal Writer's project from 1936 to 1938 with ex-slaves living in Texas. Although most of the former slaves were not asked specifically about quilts or quilting parties, these activities were mentioned several times. In fact, quiltings and corn huskings were mentioned most frequently throughout all the interviews conducted by the Federal Writer's Project.[9] While the narratives really do not provide specific details on the methods or designs used by the ex-slaves in producing their quilts, the interviews do reveal just how valuable the quilts were to their owners and their creators.

Many of the ex-slaves who were interviewed demonstrated the value that they placed on their quilts merely by listing the quilts among their meager possessions. John Bates, who

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[8]Jacqueline Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1985), 30.

[9]Fry, Stitched from the Soul, 71.

lived in Limestone County, described his home and belongings as, "a one room log house with a dirt floo and two families lived in dis. We had beds of shucks laid across some ropes dat was run through holes bored in boards and a few quilts."[10] Vinnie Brunson, of Freestone County, related a similar account of her home explaining, "we des had a bed, hit wuz homemade, an' a cornhusk mattress, covered wid a patchwork quilt dat my mother made."[11] By acknowledging that her mother made the quilt, Vinnie Brunson demonstrated a small sense of pride for her mother's skill.

Steve Robertson, who lived near Brenham while a slave, further demonstrates just how valuable quilts were to the slaves. At the close of the Civil War, Robertson's owner did not inform his slaves of their freedom. Robertson's mother soon heard the news from another ex-slave and quickly gathered her family and all their possessions. Robertson remembered, "W'en all us gits to de cabin she gathahs our clothes--jus' a few dat weuns have an' de few old ragged quilts weuns have--an' makes de bundles fo' de oldah fo'ks

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[10]George P. Rawick, ed., Texas Narratives Part 1, vol. 2, The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Supplement, Series 2 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979), 212.
*Author's note: For the purpose of this work, materials from the slave narratives will be quoted in their original recorded form.

[11]Ibid. vol. 3; 512.

to tote. Den weuns sneaks out de qua'tahs."[12] Even these "old ragged quilts" were still too valuable to leave behind.

While the owners of these quilts certainly regarded them as prized possessions, interviews with the quilters themselves demonstrate the women's sense of pride in their own accomplishments. Due to the lack of time and materials that the slaves faced, this sense of pride often did not manifest itself as pride in an artistic creation. Rather, the slave quilters took pride in their own resourcefulness.[13] As Irella Battle Walker of Bastrop County recalled, "We'd take old wore out clothes and britches, piece 'em up and stuff cotton in 'em. Dem was our quilts. Dey was heavy and dey was putty wahm."[14] Clearly Walker's final statement reveals her own sense of satisfaction in having produced a useful good.

Josie Brown, who was a slave in Tyler County, also remembered "making do" when it came to finding material. She explained, "I still lub t' quilt. Us make nine-patch pattern; Star 'r' Beth'lem wid five point. Us use ol britches legs, d' hin' (hind) part 'r' dresses 'n' such."[15] Similarly, Elvira Boles, whose owner moved her to Texas

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[12]Ibid. vol. 8; 3331, 3336.

[13]Jones, Labor of Love, 30.

[14]Rawick, Texas Narratives, vol. 10, American Slave Supplement, Series 2, 3935.

[15]Ibid. vol. 3; 484.

during the last year of the Civil War, stated, "Evva Christmas they'd give us a new calico dress and we'd piece up de old ones."[16] Even one of the male ex-slaves recalled the difficulties that the women had in obtaining supplies. Harrison Beckett remembered, "Old marster he cared for his hands pretty well considerin' everything. In de ginnin' time he 'lowed de wimmin to pick up de cotton what drop on de groun' and make into beds, an' quilts, an' comforts."[17] The ability of these slave quilters to use every available scrap in order to produce the goods they needed demonstrated not only their thrift, but their skill as well, and, as evidenced in the slave narratives, this ability provided them with a true sense of satisfaction.

Although the Texas slave narratives generally do not include information on specific patterns used by the slaves in creating their quilts, the narratives do provide a brief glimpse into the psyche of the quilters which suggests that quilts were indeed a project vested with "aesthetic meaning."[18] As ex-slave Elvira Boles simply put it, "I worked late and made pretty quilts."[19] Alice Cole also had fond memories of her quilts stating, "we slept real warm all

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[16]Ibid. vol. 2; 336, 339.

[17]Ibid.vol. 2; 229.

[18]Vlach, Afro-American Folk Crafts, 153.

[19]Rawick, Texas Narratives, vol. 2, American Slave Supplement, Series 2, 336.

the time don't care how cold the weather would get outside."[20]

Often it is not the quilter herself who extols her artistic talent but a son or daughter. As Willis Easter recounted his slave days in McClennan County, when the slaves made their own cloth and dyes, he extolled, "Mammy could spin, card, weave an' quilt jes lak eny body wanted."[21] Aaron Ray exhibited the same enthusiasm for his mother's work when he bragged:

> My mammy knowed how to spin an' weave an' make clot'es wif' de bes' ob 'em. W'en I wuz er little boy, I picked de cotton for her to spin into de thread and to make cotton bats fer quilts wid. I picked de cotton offen de seed by hand, case dey didn't hab no cotton gins lak dey hab now-a-days.[22]

Sally Neely expressed equal pride in her craft when she remembered, ". . . our quilts were made by hand to cover us with and they kept us real warm."[23] Although she does not mention any real artistic achievement, her statement that the quilts were "made by hand," shows her pride in the talents of the slave women quilters.

Many of the women continued to quilt after they had obtained their freedom. As Emma Watson's testimony demonstrates, quilts were still a valued possession to these

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[20]Ibid. vol. 3; 747.

[21]Ibid. vol. 4; 1250.

[22]Ibid. vol. 8; 3254.

[23]Ibid. vol. 7; 2885.

ex-slaves. Watson spoke proudly of her family having their own place in Ellis County where they "set up housekeepin' with a bedstead, some quilts and a li'l old stove."[24] Perhaps an even stronger sentiment was expressed by Fannie Tippin. She had been a slave in Kentucky but moved to Texas in 1881. Obviously she had perfected her craft as she told interviewers, "I wish you could see the quilts I made for the Burke Burnett ranch. I got $2.50 apiece for 'em. Sometimes I'd get $10.00 or $15.00 at a time when I took the quilts to the ranch. Dat's de way I paid fo' my home. I'se busy all the time."[25] Such accounts clearly demonstrate that these artifacts represented more to their creators and users than merely warmth and comfort. Quilts were also symbols of beauty that the seamstress took pride in creating. Finally, for the children of the women who made the quilts, this homespun craft became a symbol of family unity and home in an all too uncertain environment.

The fact that quilts represented all of these various sentiments to the slaves becomes even more evident upon examining the amount of work required of the slave women on a daily basis. Despite the demands placed on their time and physical endurance, they still continued to quilt. Ex-slave

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[24]George P. Rawick, ed., Texas Narratives Part 4, vol. 5, The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1972), 149.

[25]Rawick, Texas Narratives, vol. 9, American Slave Supplement, Series 2, 3880.

Emma Taylor recalled the harsh work demands of the Texas plantation:

> Us niggers has to git up at four in de mornin', and work, work till us can't see no more. Den dey work at night. De men chops wood and hauls poles to build fences and make wood, and de women folks has to spin four cuts of thread every night and make all de clothes. Some has to card cotton to make quilts and some weave and knits stockin's. Marse give each one a chore to do at night and iffen it warn't did when we went to bed, we's whipped.[26]

Henry J. Richardson recalled the equally harsh workload placed on his mother as a slave in Nacogdoches stating, "My mother worked all day and seldom had time to cook very much, but we managed to have two meals every day. She cooked our meals after she finished all of her chores for master."[27] Amazingly enough, despite the demanding chores in the fields and to feed and care for their own families, these women still pursued the art of quilting. As Della Mun Bibles testified of her early days as a slave in Bosque County: "They would have us children pick the lint from the seed after supper while we sat around the fire. The old folks would whittle churn paddles, and things to use and card bats for quilts, or piece quilts and sew."[28] Similarly, William Stone remembered that in the winter, "De wimmen 'ud sit by de fire a-talkin' an' a-piecin' de quilts, er spinnin' de

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[26]Rawick, Texas Narratives Part 4, vol. 5, The American Slave, 74.

[27]Rawick, Texas Narratives, vol. 8, American Slave Supplement, Series 2, 3306.

[28]Ibid. vol. 2; 289, 292.

thread. De ole men 'ud weave cotton baskets an' chair bottoms."[29] Perhaps even more striking is the story of Elvira Boles. She took great pride in the quilts she made. She told interviewers:

> I'se worked to death. I fiahed (fired) the furnace for three years. Stan' in front wid hot fiah (fire) on my face. Hard work, but God was wid me. We'd work till dark, quit awhile after sundown. . . . Don evvy thing but split rails. I've cut timber. . . . an ah ploughed. Don evvy thing a man could do. . . . I worked late and made pretty quilts.[30]

For these women, quilting had transcended its utilitarian function. By completing their daily work schedules and still finding the energy and desire to quilt, the slave women have shown their use of quilting as an expressive outlet.

Although quilting in itself provided slaves with only a momentary escape from bondage on some level, slaves viewed quilting bees and quilting parties as celebrations. In their simplest form, these gatherings provided the women with a network of friendship and cooperation. The more elaborate affairs, however, often developed into a feast, a dance, and a chance for social interaction with the male slaves as well. Sarah Hatley observed such parties as a

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[29]Ibid. vol. 9; 3742.

[30]Ibid. vol. 9; 336.

young girl in Georgetown, Texas making special note of the male visitors:

> When I was young, we ust to go to the country to quiltin's an' suppers. Dey would get together an' have quiltin's an' fix suppers fo' de party at night. De men-folks would go to 'em too when dey had a party. De men would always come about dark an' eat supper an' set aroun' an' laugh an' talk.[31]

According to Julia Banks, an ex-slave from San Antonio, these parties provided such enjoyment that the slaves would walk great distances just to attend the festivities:

> I used to hear my grandmother tell about the good times they used to have. They would go from one plantation to another and have quiltin's and corn huskin's. And they would dance. . . . They would hoof it five or six miles and didn't mind it. . . . And those off the other plantations would come over and join in the work. And they would nearly always have a good dinner. Sometimes some of the owners would give 'em a hog or sometin' nice to eat, but some of 'em didn't.[32]

Obviously such parties provided a much needed form of temporary relief from the shackles of servitude.

Often times, participants of the quilting party were lured there by the food as well as the company. Ex-bondsman Henry Johnson remembered:

> Who want to make de quilt would tell de others an' dey'd go to de bigges' house in de quarters where dey had de most room. Den some of 'em thread de needle. Dey pass de needle from one to 'nother 'till it got to de threader. Den when dey finish dey had de "Take me Out." Dat was a long table with pie an' diffrunt things. . . .

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[31]Ibid. vol. 5; 1679.

[32]Rawick, Texas Narratives Part 1, vol. 4, The American Slave, 93, 95, 97.

> Dere was a terrible lot of stuff. Den dey eat an' had a good time.[33]

Josephine Tippit Compton, who lived near Waco while a slave, told a similar story:

> In de winters when we gits thro' wid de fiel' work den we has quiltins. De nabors would kum in an' dey all quilts an cooks dere dinner an' has a good time quiltin an' eatin. What did we eat? Well we had sweet taters, hominy, an' effen we had killed hogs, we has some fresh meat, maybe dumplin's an' pie. . . . Sometimes we sing when we 'all quilts.[34]

Food definitely played a large role in turning the quilting party into a celebration. Plantation owners knew this as well as the slaves and would often promise to supply provisions for a quilting party if the slaves finished their work on time. Many times, these master-sponsored quilting parties were held at Christmastime.[35] Ex-slave Rosa Washington remembered, "We had a big quiltin' Christmas day. We'd piece de quilts outa scraps. Pick ovah quilters. Some couldn't quilt. Dey'd dance in yard all day."[36]

One plantation owner was so sure of the slaves' attraction to such gatherings that he organized a quilting party in an attempt to lure in and catch a runaway slave.

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[33]Rawick, Texas Narratives, vol. 6, American Slave Supplement, Series 2, 2007.

[34]Ibid. vol. 3; 910.

[35]Fry, Stitched from the Soul, 71.

[36]Rawick, Texas Narratives, vol. 10, American Slave Supplement, Series 2, 3981.

Walter Rimm, who was living at the time in San Patricio County as a slave, witnessed the event:

> . . . we sees lots of run-awayers. One old fellow name John been a run-awayer for four years and de patterrollers tries all dey tricks, but dey can't cotch him. Dey wants him bad, 'cause it 'spire other slaves to run away if he stays a-loose. Dey sots de trap for him. Dey knows he like good eats, so dey 'ranges for a quiltin' and gives chitlin's and lye hominey. John comes and am inside when de patterrollers rides up to de door. Everybody gits quiet and John stands near de door, and when dey starts to come in he grabs de shovel full of hot ashes and throws dem into de patterrollers faces. He gits through and runs off, hollerin' 'Bird in de air!'[37]

Certainly this story of a runaway slave willing to risk the chance of capture to attend the party indicates just how important these events were to the slaves.

The satisfaction that the slaves obtained from the quiltings is evident in the fact that the slaves continued to hold the events even after they obtained their freedom. In one instance, quiltings served as a type of support group for the community. Alice Wilkins, an ex-slave from Springfield, recalled:

> De wimmin' all took part in de community meetin's, camp meetin's, singin' schools an' quiltins. Dis gib dem a chance to meet each other an' learn de news, sometimes dey has de quiltin's in de church an' sometimes in de homes an' dey all eats together an' bring dey dinner, an' dey takes an' quilts an' tells each other de news, wen dey goes home dey has all de news of de community an' sometimes dis is a good way to help each other for

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[37]Rawick, Texas Narratives Part 3, vol. 5, The American Slave, 248.

> dey finds out who is sick an' dey plan how dey takes dey time goin' to help take keer to dem.[38]

Another ex-slave, Tom Mills, remembered quilting parties that closely resembled those of slave days:

> After freedom, I remember these quiltin's where they would have big dinners. They would have me there, threadin' needles for 'em. We always had a big time Christmas. They had dances and dinners for a week. . . . They would celebrate the holidays out.[39]

No matter what size of quilting the participants organized, whether it was just a small group of women working together in the evenings, or a large festivity filled with music and dancing, these gatherings provided a sense of closeness and companionship. At the very least, the freewheeling spirit of the quiltings offered a temporary escape from the brutality of daily slave life, and a short reprieve from the drudgeries of mindless chores. It gave them a chance to forget, if even for a little while, that they were slaves. The fact that the gatherings continued even after slavery had ended lends credit to the importance that these social events had played in the lives of the slaves. Obviously quiltings were an effective means of socializing that combined creativity with the chance to share the latest news, a good meal, and some fun and games. Yet at the end, the women had joined forces to create a

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[38]Rawick, Texas Narratives, vol. 10, American Slave Supplement, Series 2, 4052.

[39]Rawick, Texas Narratives Part 3, vol. 5, The American Slave, 98.

valuable commodity for either their friends or family members. This combined effect establishes the quilting party as one of the more significant aspects of this art form.

Historian John W. Blassingame has stated that:

> Antebellum black slaves created several unique cultural forms which lightened their burden of oppression, promoted group solidarity, provided ways for verbalizing aggression, sustaining hope, building self-esteem, and often represented areas of life largely free from the control of whites. However oppressive or dehumanizing the plantation was, the struggle for survival was not severe enough to crush all of the slaves creative instincts.[40]

Although Blassingame may not have had quilting in mind when he wrote this, the statement aptly describes the art of quilting as employed by the slave population in Texas. Clearly, the slave quilters regarded the craft as more than merely a means of achieving a warm bed cover. This fact is evident in the countless tales these women told of their long days of hard work. Surely these women found a sense of joy in creating their quilts that inspired them to stay up late at night artfully piecing together the scraps they had gathered when they could have easily gone to bed and rested up for the next morning's four o'clock work call. Yet these women refused to surrender their spirits to slavery. To merely complete their assigned daily tasks would have been,

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[40]John W. Blassingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 41.

in essence, submitting to a world of drudgery. Instead, these women found an escape. In quilting the women found a medium through which to express themselves. Through their choice of design, and color, these women created symbolic works of art. Through their work as a group, they established a sense of solidarity, and through the merriment provided by the quilting parties, they achieved at least a moment of joy in an otherwise dreary existence. And in the end, when the quilter had completed her craft, she had obtained a feeling of self-worth for she had completed not only an object of utility, but of beauty as well. Although for these women there was no real escape from the shackles of servitude, quilting rewarded them with a sense of freedom beyond the physical realm.

CHAPTER IV

STITCHING THE PIECES BACK TOGETHER: TEXAS WOMEN AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Through the years, Texans have shown their sense of rugged individualism by settling the land and gradually improving both their social and economic conditions. Despite these accomplishments, they were still not immune to the economic forces around them. For the most part, however, the Stock Market crash of 1929 passed without any major immediate effect on a large segment of the Texas populace. After all, many Texans did not possess the means to have invested in the stock market in the first place. As historian Lionel V. Patenaude observed about the effect of the Great Depression on the state, "Texans were already poor, and to many assessing one's degree of poverty was a futile exercise."[1] While the stock market crash is popularly considered the starting point of the Great Depression, numerous other factors had already been contributing to the economic downturn, and Texas (as with all the other states) could not avoid these conditions.

In fact, many Texans suffered tremendously during the Depression. Historian Robert Ozment remembered what

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[1]Lionel V. Patenaude, "Texas and the New Deal," in The Depression in the Southwest, ed. Donald W. Whisenhunt, (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1980), 89.

life was like for his family in Temple, Texas during those years. In 1929, his father was employed as a locomotive engineer. The family was buying a home. They owned a new Overland Whippet automobile, and had money in the bank, and plenty of food and clothing. By 1933, all of this had changed. The family had lost everything but the Whippet and were living in a rent-free house in a very poor section of Temple. Ozment wrote:

> We often had little to eat but oatmeal, we were without electricity, and had few clothes. I remember this house well because it had no coverings on the splintery old floors. My one pair of shoes had to be saved for winter use, and during the summer my feet were constantly bandaged from the thrust of splinters.
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> I also remember the Whippet. We had no money for either gas or tires so it just sat in the shed. It became a kind of physical symbol of the times to me because, like some of the humans, it was waiting a chance to go to work and did not understand why it could not. All it could do was to waste away its productive years waiting and hoping until the inexorable end should arrive. We sold it for five dollars in 1939, not long before scarcity of automobiles because of the war would have increased its value.[2]

Ozment's recollections of this bleak period of his childhood, and its sudden and seemingly incomprehensible reversals of fortune, was, quite surely, replicated in a great many families throughout Texas in the 1930s. Indeed, the impact of the Depression appears to have spared very few and to have been equally devastating in both urban and rural

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[2]Robert Ozment, "Temple Bankers Face the Depression," in Texas Cities and the Great Depression, ed. Willena C. Adams, (Austin, Texas: Miscellaneous Papers Number Three, 1973), 1-2.

areas. By 1930, for example, unemployment was clearly on the increase and early that year, "even before most of the state acknowledged the depression, . . . mass meetings of protest were held by displaced workers throughout the state."[3] The problem continued to worsen over the ensuing weeks and months, and by December of 1931, the Public Welfare Department of the city of Dallas, population just over 250,000, listed 18,500 unemployed men and women in the city.[4]

While these numbers were alarming enough to the urban dwellers in Texas, many of the farmers and ranchers faced even greater hardships. For the rural Texans living in the Panhandle, for example, the effects of the Great Depression were intensified by the drought and subsequent dust storms of the 1930s "that virtually halted crop and livestock production."[5] This area would soon be referred to as part of the Dust Bowl region. The Dust Bowl included parts of western Kansas, eastern Colorado and New Mexico, and the Panhandle of Oklahoma. These lands had once been considered among the richest farmland in the United States. With the

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[3]Donald Wayne Whisenhunt, "Texas in the Depression, 1929-1933: A Study of Public Reaction" (Ph. D. diss., Texas Tech University, 1966), 146.

[4]Dorothy DeMoss, "Resourcefulness in the Financial Capital: Dallas, 1929-1933," in Texas Cities, ed. Adams, 124.

[5]Garry L. Nall, "The Struggle to Save the Land," in The Depression in the Southwest, ed. Whisenhunt, 26.

drought of the 1930s, however, and the great winds that blew away the topsoil, the region faced the threat of losing its production capabilities permanently.[6]

Not only did the farmers and ranchers have to deal with this loss of production, but they also had to face the frightening, miserable conditions that resulted from the intense dust storms. Hazel Shaw, a 1930s resident of Dalhart (a town located on the High Plains of the Texas Panhandle), described one such storm as "not just black--not just thick--it was black thick."[7] Bob Langhorne, a Dalhart banker in the 1930s, talked of how impossible it was to keep the dust out of one's house. He remembered, "that fine dust would just seep in and you could turn the lights on in a room and it was still dim--real dim--because of there being so much dust in the room."[8] A similar description of the "black dusters" was related by Beale Queen, wagon-master for the JA Ranch in Palo Duro Canyon. Queen recalled:

> The dust storms we had would leave a kind of greasy looking dust on everything it could get to--a different color from other dust that we had. You'd see a black duster coming. It was just like a high wave rolling over and over toward you. . . . From then on it was so dark that you couldn't strike a match and see the light. . . . It was the blackest dark you ever saw.[9]

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[6]Ibid.

[7]John C. Dawson, Sr., High Plains Yesterdays: From XIT Days through Drouth and Depression, (Austin, Texas: Eakin Press, 1985), 177.

[8]Ibid., 185-186.

[9]Ibid., 184-185.

These stories reveal only a small degree of the misery caused by the dust storms that turned even the simple act of breathing into a difficult task. Considering the economic effects that the Depression had already had on agriculture (farm prices declined 65.5 percent and cattle prices fell 58.9 percent from 1929 to 1930), the results of the Dust Bowl were devastating.[10] Certainly the survivors of such events had to overcome emotional as well as economic trials.

Clearly the Depression and the Dust Bowl years left Texans struggling for funds to cover the costs of even the barest of necessities. In response to the hard times, the women began to rekindle some of the "old-pioneer-spirit" and "adapt to a lifestyle of leftovers and hand-me-downs."[11] Included in this new lifestyle was the art of quilting. Women began to quilt once again out of necessity, just as their pioneer ancestors had done. Since many Texans during the Depression could not even afford to buy blankets, these women used their skills and limited resources to provide warmth for their families.[12] The usefulness of the quilt did not end with its utilitarian function, however. Along

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[10]Karoline Patterson Bresenhan and Nancy O'Bryant Puentes, Lone Stars Volume I: A Legacy of Texas Quilts, 1836-1936 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 144.

[11]Julia Kirk Blackwelder, Women of the Depression: Caste and Culture in San Antonio, 1929-1939, (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1984), 25.

[12]Suzanne Yabsley, Texas Quilts, Texas Women, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1984), 35.

with the sense of accomplishment that the women obtained from creating something of material value for their families, they also obtained a sense of comfort and enjoyment from creating these quilts, and in the process, they oftentimes created an object of beauty at a time when "the comforts of life became only fond memories for many Texans."[13]

Melinda Florence Rush Hall provides an excellent example of a quilter who combined the "art of making do" with artistic expression. Hall had moved to Texas with her family in 1875, eventually settling in Bovina, a farming community in the Panhandle county of Parmer. In 1932, Hall created a quilt that clearly reflected the concerns of the times. The hand-appliqued quilt, currently in the posession of Hall's great niece, June Looney McMeans, depicts a West Texas farmhouse as the seasons change throughout the year. The changing seasons and subsequent weather conditions would represent great significance to a farm family on the Plains since the weather would affect the crops, and thus, the family's income. With her quilt, Hall depicts a normal cycle of seasons and the return of seasonal flowers. Surely these pictures would have been viewed as reassuring signs of a normal cycle of life. Besides making a statement with her quilt, Hall provided another glimpse into the time period in

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[13]Karoline Patterson Bresenhan and Nancy O'Bryant Puentes, Lone Stars Volume II: A Legacy of Texas Quilts, 1936-1986, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 29.

which it was created by making the backing of the quilt out of six, pieced feedsacks. Although the quilt with its applique work was more extravagant than most quilters could afford, Hall's frugality still surfaced in her use of "make do" materials for the seldom seen back of the quilt.[14]

Another West Texas quilter, Ruby "Mutty" Henson, a Texas native who has resided for more than sixty years in Shep, a once- thriving farming community thirty miles south of Abilene, also recalled making use of other household goods besides just "sewing" fabric to create her quilts. In the thirties, Henson recalled that it was not difficult to get enough scraps of fabric to "piece" together a quilt since, "most ladies did sewing in the home. They had to sew for the family, and they always had quilt scraps, and the scraps made quilt tops."[15] These sewing scraps were not the only materials being used to their fullest extent. Henson remembered:

> In fact, I made a quilt lining from those [sugar] bags. They were all cotton, and of course it took a good many of them to make a quilt lining, but they were always used for something useful. Most of the time we washed those bags, we could get the letters off. . . . We didn't waste anything. We used to buy feed for our chickens in hundred-pound feedsacks, and they were printed feedsacks. . . . Four of them you could've made a lining for a quilt. Some women would make a quilt top from those sacks. As a rule I usually had my tops pieced, but sometimes you could line your quilt tops that needed to be set together, you'd set them together

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[14]Bresenhan and Puentes, Lone Stars Volume I, 144.

[15]Ruby "Mutty" Henson, interview by author, 21 September 1997, Shep, Texas, tape recording.

> maybe with feedsacks. But we never wasted one, and they made beautiful pillowcases.[16]

Along with never wasting any useful goods, Henson also illustrates her concern for aesthetic pleasure by explaining that she would not use feedsacks for her quilt top, but rather, "as a rule," she usually had them pieced. Whereas using four full feedsacks would have taken less effort than cutting apart and sewing back together small pieces of fabric, Henson opted for the more time consuming method in order to create a pleasing design. Henson provides further evidence of the importance she placed on creating an aesthetically pleasing quilt, by actually spending cash during such hard times to buy fabric. She recalled:

> Sometimes I'd buy a quilt lining in town. You could get five yards of unbleachened for a dollar. And that was considered a good quilt lining. We could afford it. Of course, we didn't do that every week now, or every month. I always tried to quilt two quilts for myself every onced a year. Two quilts a year kept your quilts up to date. Unless you had a bigger family. . . . Of course, we always had some of our better quilts for special occasions. . . . We really valued those cotton sugar sacks and our flour sacks.[17]

Athalee Hopper, who came to Texas at age nine in 1936, related a similar account of "making do" and "using up what was on hand." She remembered that her mother actually used leftover feedsacks to create quilt tops, but that did not

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[16]Henson, interview by author, 1997.

[17]Henson, interview by author, 1997.

mean that she was not particular about her craft. As Hopper stated:

> We always had chickens and pigs, and you'd buy the feed in these big sacks, and they got to makin' printed sacks. And so, when Dad would say he, you know, had to go into town to buy some feed for the chickens and the pigs and whatever, well mama would show him which sack she had and 'be sure and get another one just like it.' And that's how I learned to sew. . . was using the feed sacks. That's what we had so that's what we used.[18]

Clearly Hopper's mother took pride in her thrift as well as the quilts she was making.

Likewise, Prunella Bowmer Towler blended both her talents and her resourcefulness to create a quilt that would become a family heirloom. Towler created the quilt in 1938 as a future wedding present for her then six year old grandson. In the true tradition of "making do," Towler made a Cobweb quilt design which made full use of one's scrap bag materials. These designs were almost always pieced onto a newspaper backing. The small pieces were actually sewn onto a piece of newspaper since, often, the pieces of fabric were too small to be worked with on their own. This method allowed the quiltmaker to make use of the tiniest scraps of fabric. Quilters using the Cobweb design often completed such a quilt over a long period of time as the tiny scraps of material were accumulated. Even though the quilt made by Towler was narrow, just wide enough to cover the bed and

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[18]Athalee Hopper, interview by author, 6 March 1997, Lubbock, Texas, tape recording.

hang down a few inches, Towler's family treasured the quilt and has passed it down through two generations.[19]

These women took great pride in their ability to "make do" with what they had at hand, and as the husband of Mary Frances Nunley Ricketts soon discovered, questioning this ability could have dire results. Ricketts, a West Texas native who married in 1936 told this story:

> I remember one time right after I was married, my husband came home and he found me cutting out pieces and I had a round piece that I'd cut out of the neck of something I'd made. . . and I put a square pattern in there and cut off and it left the little half circles on each corner and my husband said, 'Well why are you doing that, are you going to just waste that?' It made me so angry that he'd question what I was doing. I think I, in one of the patterns that I had, I could cut a strip or two off of that and use it in the pattern that I had. I don't remember what I said to him when he asked me that, but I know he got the message because he never did nose around my sewing anymore.[20]

Ricketts' story demonstrates the importance women placed on their resourcefulness during the Depression. For many who did not work outside of the home, being thrifty helped make a positive contribution to the family's income.

Another account of a frugal quilter who combined her thrift with artful creativity was related by the quiltmaker's proud daughter. She recalled that her mother, Maude Franks Combs, who had moved to Texas as a child in the late 1890s, also pieced her quilts onto newspaper backings,

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[19]Bresenhan and Puentes, Lone Stars Volume II, 43.

[20]Mary Frances Nunley Ricketts, interview by author, 14 March 1997, Lubbock, Texas, tape recording.

however, Combs' resourcefulness did not end there. Her daughter explained, "For the outside edges, my mother must have used the bits and pieces [of fabric] left over from what she had when she married in 1908."[21] She combined these with "the vivid 'washfast' prints and solids of the late thirties and forties."[22] Combs stitched the assortment of material together to create a quilt top. The top was then placed over a batting made of "hand-carded cotton that had been picked up in tow sacks from the scraps of excess cotton left over at the gins."[23] Combs then completed the quilt with a backing that had been pieced together from "ten pound sugar sacks bleached with lye soap."[24] Besides creating quilts merely to serve a utilitarian function, Combs took pride in her creativity as well. As her daughter recalled:

> She taught her creative pattern designing to others and taught them that a quilt must evolve and not be a task, that what makes a quilt unique is honestly using, creating imaginatively with what is at hand. I do not recall at what age she taught me to carefully mark, cut, and to string tiny pieces for intricate blocks, but when I was enrolled in kindergarten, I had scissor marks on my right hand and my thimble finger was already bent . . . and I was not even five years old.[25]

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[21]Bresenhan and Puentes, Lone Stars Volume II, 63.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Ibid.

Clearly the memory told by Combs' daughter reflects a sense of pride in her mother's skills. And, by passing on to her daughter the idea that using "what is at hand" is what makes a quilt a "unique" creation, Combs has truly defined the phrase "the art of making do."

Despite Combs' defining statement, however, Helen Levacy provides perhaps the best example of "making do." Not only did this Texas native struggle with scarcity of money and goods during the Depression, but she also lived in an area with little female contact (her mother had died, leaving her to care for two brothers and her father). Levacy completed all of her quilts by herself working "after everything was done in the morning 'til time to fix lunch. Then after lunch until time to go do laundry, or carry the water, or fix supper."[26] Besides dealing with the heavy workload while just a teenager, Levacy also had to contend with the fact that her father worked as a sharecropper, and while conditions were bad before, the Depression left the family with no money. Levacy recalled:

> And of course, we didn't have money. So for us kids to get some spending money, we'd go down to the creek, and hunt around for a rat's nest. Usually they were full of real nice pecans, and you'd dig 'em out, and carry 'em, and sell 'em to the store. They'd pay you money for the pecans, and that's the way we got some spending money. . . . [For the quilt lining], usually I'd use unbleached domestic. It was like ten cents a yard, and you'd go

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[26]Helen Levacy, interview by author, 1988, Lamesa, Texas, tape recording.

> pick up pecans and get enough pecans and sell 'em and buy it.[27]

Levacy's extreme act of retrieving pecans from rats' nests in order to earn money for fabric exemplifies the Depression and pioneer spirit of self reliance.

While women such as Helen Levacy, Ruby "Mutty" Henson, Prunella Bowmer Towler, and Maude Franks Combs worked tiny pieces of fabric into warm, decorative bedcoverings for their families, a large number of people, including non-quilters, began to take notice of such creative talents. Beginning in the late 1920s and continuing on into the 1930s, the mention of quilting in printed materials began to increase steadily. In fact, this period of time "is commonly regarded as a time of widespread revival of interest in quilts in North America."[28]

Even the federal government took notice of the "art" of quilting. In the 1930s, the Federal Art Project, which was established as a branch of the Works Progress Administration, began the compilation of the Index of American Design. The purpose of the project "was to compile and eventually to publish a visual survey of the objects of decorative, folk and popular arts made in America from the time of settlement to about 1900. . . . Each object was recorded in an accurate water color drawing accompanied by a

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[27]Ibid.

[28]Yabsley, Texas Quilts, 35.

sheet of written information giving the object's date, source, location and ownership."[29] Not only were quilts being recognized as a true "folk art," in print, but the public was beginning to appreciate the art of quilting as well and began to show it by spending some of their meager cash savings to own a quilt.

Mrs. Jack Thurman of Austin, Texas was among those connoisseurs of the art of quilting. In 1936, she saw a Texas Bluebonnet quilt being raffled off. The tickets sold for twenty-five cents apiece or five for a dollar. Even though "things were tight," Thurman liked the quilt and bought a single ticket.[30] Luckily she won the quilt, a nice return on the investment of a quarter. Thurman's purchase of a chance ticket in such hard times is a clear demonstration of her admiration of quilts.

Myrtle Augusta Loomis Patterson demonstrated a similar appreciation for quilting through her support of the quilting program sponsored by the Works Progress Administration. While Patterson enjoyed piecing her own quilt tops, she did not enjoy the "chore" of the actual quilting. In other words, she enjoyed designing the top of the quilt, but she did not enjoy bending over a quilting frame stitching through the top, batting, and backing in

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[29]Sandra Shaffer Tinkham, ed., *The Consolidated Catalog to:* The Index of American Design (Cambridge: Chadwick-Healey Ltd, 1980), Foreword.

[30]Yabsley, Texas Quilts, 48b.

order to complete the actual quilt. To remedy this problem, Patterson employed the quilting services sponsored by the WPA during the Depression. The WPA program charged about one dollar for each spool of thread used.[31]

Certainly not everyone could afford this service, but those who could helped place a public as well as a monetary value on the skills of the quilters. For women during the difficult times of the Depression, receiving money for their "home-based" talents provided them with an even greater sense of pride and purpose. Not only did this money validate their skills, but it allowed the women a chance to provide an actual source of income for their families. The chance to earn money during such hard times surely gave these women an even greater sense of accomplishment.

Of course, the women quilting during the thirties did not do so simply because they could not afford any other type of bedcover, or only to make money. They (like most of the quilters before them) also made use of the fact that quilts are easily worked on by several people at one time. While many women continued to give quilting parties as they had in the past, some communities saw a change in how group quiltings were conducted. A new aspect of the group quilting in the 1930s was the organization of quilting clubs. These clubs were generally created "in small towns and rural areas and were an amplification of the old-time

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[31]Bresenhan and Puentes, Lone Stars Volume II, 53.

quilting bee."[32] The groups usually consisted of friends and family members. Although receiving help on a quilt from the club may have helped lighten the individual workload of its participants, the main attraction to such organizations was still the chance for social interaction.

Mary Frances Nunley Ricketts, who lived in the West Texas area from her birth in 1914 until she died in 1997, recalled that her mother continued to give and attend the old fashioned quilting parties even during the Depression. She remembered:

> They had fewer (quilting parties). . . . Every once in a while they would get together, and usually it would be a freezer of ice cream because we had the milk from the cows, and she'd bake a cake, and I know she'd put a plain white icing on it, but it was sweet so it was good.[33]

Although this particular gathering does not sound as elaborate as those described by some of the pioneers which involved dancing and tables of rich food, the Depression era quilting parties were still an important social outlet. The fact that Ricketts' mother still went to such lengths during such hard times demonstrates just how much pleasure such an event would have brought to these women.

West Texas native, Ruby "Mutty" Henson, told of a less formal quilting. Instead of holding a real "party," Henson's neighbors decided to get together simply to help

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[32]Yabsley, Texas Quilts, 36.

[33]Ricketts, interview by author, 1997.

out a friend in the community. At the time (in 1937), Henson was expecting her first child and was in the process of making a quilt. She remembered:

> While I was pregnant I had a quilt up in my home and the ladies came and helped me quilt it out. It was an adult quilt, it was a quilt for a full bed. I had a baby quilt all right. My neighbors helped fix it, I think they fixed it for the baby shower. . ., but this was a quilt that I wanted to get quilted . . . so the ladies came and helped me out. The neighbors knew I had it up. One of my neighbors came and helped me put it up. Most of them were people that I went to church with.[34]

Not only is Henson's tale reminiscent of the old pioneer days, but it also provides a prime example of the Depression era mentality in a rural community, helping out a neighbor during hard times.

Tommy Morman remembered a quilting club in Spur, Texas that was a family affair. While Morman, who was born in 1941, observed these activities as a small child in the early 1940s, her relatives had been holding their quiltings even before the 1930s. Of the gatherings Morman witnessed, she recalled:

> They would sit around, and they were all visitin' when they were quilting. They would let that frame down over the dining table, draw their chairs around. There were my two great grandmothers, and my grandmother and my great aunt and my mother. This was a social hour for them, too. They got caught up on, oh, how the crops were doing . . , if the cattle were surviving. . . . They'd sit around and they would talk, and they'd bring news of other families that lived close to them, and if somebody had a new baby, or if some child was sick, or if some person was sick and if someone needed help. And often you know, they were actually quilting to give a

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[34]Henson, interview by author, 1997.

> quilt to somebody that needed a quilt for a bed cover. And, they just enjoyed their visit.[35]

This group quilting provided these women with more than a chance to socialize. It gave them a sense of worth. Not only were they using their skills to provide for their own families, but they also put their talents to good use by quilting for charity. Still, these gatherings were not held solely for the purpose of hard work. As Morman recalled, the women took great pleasure in quilting:

> It was a time of release for them, and another thing, their work was very hard. They were on their feet. They worked hard everyday, and I'm sure they enjoyed quilting because they were sitting down visiting with whoever was there with them. . . . And, I remember then when it was time for my grandmother to fix lunch, . . . they'd pull it [the quilt] up on that frame up above the dining table. She'd fix lunch, and everybody would eat lunch around the dining table, clean up the dishes, roll that quilt down, and start again. They would work all afternoon. And, they would just mainly do that in the daytime because there was no electricity, and the light was so poor at night.[36]

Morman's account provides strong evidence that the women in her family did truly enjoy their regular quilting meetings. Surely no young child would recall in such detail the events of a dull or unpleasant event. Although this was not a true party or club, these women still obtained a great deal of social pleasure through visiting and doing charity work. In the end this "club" represents a true Depression era attitude in that, not only were the women being thrifty by

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[35]Tommy Morman, interview by author, June 20, 1997, Lubbock, Texas, tape recording.

[36]Ibid.

quilting in the first place, but they were also "making do" with the few neighbors that they had, their family.

Quilting during the Great Depression experienced a type of revival. The "folk-art" of piecing scraps together to create a quilt top resurfaced as a valuable means for women to get the most out of their "fabric dollar." In addition to providing a useful and necessary item made out of leftovers and scraps, quilting gave these women a chance to "contribute" to the family income. In a decade when relatively few women worked outside the home, especially in rural Texas, women could find a sense of accomplishment by saving the household even a few cents or dollars. For many women during the Depression, being thrifty was the only means that they had to help "support" the family. At a time when things appeared to be at their worst, quilting provided these women with friendship, comfort, and a sense of pride.

CHAPTER V

FULL CIRCLE: THE LEGACY OF TEXAS QUILTERS

While quilting had become a way of life for early Texas women, the mid-twentieth century, after World War II, witnessed a rise in average annual income and easier access to ready-made goods. Thus, women in Texas no longer viewed quilting as a necessary chore that would provide their families with a source of warmth. Despite this change, women in Texas (and across the country) continued to quilt. They no longer were quilting because they needed to, however. Now, they quilted simply because they enjoyed it as an artform and a social activity.

Quilter, Ruby "Mutty" Henson recalled that quilting parties evolved from in-home affairs during the 1930s into a community quilting club in the 1940s and 1950s. She recalled:

> We organized a quilting club and we had it in our community center. We quilted there for a number of years and some days we'd have up as many as two quilts. And there'd be a large group of women, sometimes, there'd be as many as twenty of us, and it was easier to do that many quilts. . . . We have quilted for the needy, . . ., sometimes if the family has had a fire or flooded or something, we would do some quilting for them, give them some quilts. And then, we have sold [quilts] to have money in our club. . . . People would pay us to quilt. . . . that's the way that we kept money in our club.[1]

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[1]Ruby "Mutty" Henson, interview by author, 21 September 1997, Shep, Texas, tape recording.

The members of Henson's club have since moved off or passed away. Although Henson does not continue to quilt on her own now, she still remembered her days with the quilting club fondly. She recalled:

> It was an enjoyable occasion. You know there was a lot of talk. You know how a group of ladies are going to get when they have a get together they'll have pleasant, just everyday conversations. We usually met on a Thursday. . . , and at twelve o'clock we'd have lunch. . . It was kind of a pot luck dinner, but it was very enjoyable. . . some dessert and coffee. Everybody looked forward to going to the quiltin' on Thursday. It served social and work. We did something worthwhile while we were socializing. . . . And I kind of miss them now.[2]

Another West Texas quilter, Athalee Hopper, remembered that while her mother had quilted out of necessity during the Depression, she began quilting for enjoyment during the 1950s. Hopper belonged to what she called a "stitch and chatter club" in the 1950s, a very appropriate name for describing a "modern" quilting group. The ladies met mainly as a social gathering with each person working on her own project most of the time.[3]

Unlike Hopper, who had observed her mother quilting, Marjorie Eisenbeck Henson discovered the art of quilting on her own. Born in Miles, Texas in 1940, Henson observed the resurgence of quilting in the late 1970s. She took a class in Tyler, Texas in 1980 to learn the artform

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[2]Ibid.

[3]Athalee Hopper, interview by author, 6 March 1997, Lubbock, Texas, tape recording.

herself. She then joined the quilt guild in Tyler and a small quilting group. The smaller group provided Henson with an artistic and social outlet. The women in her group would usually work on their own quilts, but they sometimes worked on each other's projects. Henson recalled that the women in this group helped her complete her first quilt. She continued to join local quilting guilds and groups whenever she moved to a new town. Her most recent move was to Madison, Mississippi where she joined a quilting guild that has sponsored workshops, brought in special teachers, and is working towards publishing a book on Mississippi quilts.[4]

Another West Texas quilting group combined the social as well as the charitable aspects of the "old-time quilting bee." The group of 140 women, known as Associates of Lubbock Christian University, started meeting on April 29, 1958. Most of these women were mothers of Lubbock Christian College students. The purpose of this group was to raise money for the newly formed college. They held monthly luncheons, sold baked goods at the South Plains Fair, and quilted to raise money. Over the years, the Associates' fundraising has paid for chorus robes, track uniforms, science lab equipment, building the home economics building, and numerous renovations throughout the campus. Since 1980,

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[4]Marjorie Eisenbeck Henson, interview by author, 10 July 1997, Lubbock, Texas, tape recording.

the quilting meetings have been held every Monday without fail. This dedication, however, does not mean all work and no play. The quilters often pass the time by sharing jokes. As member Ola Faye Fish pointed out, "This is how we get our laughs for the week."[5]

Along with the continuation of group quilting, the appreciation of the art of quilting has continued to expand as well. Museums and private promoters have realized that quilters and non-quilters alike enjoy viewing old and new quilts as an artform. As a result, quilt shows and festivals have become almost common place. The Colorado City Museum offers an example of a smaller show. The Museum displayed quilts throughout the fall of 1997. Approximately 68 quilts were provided by area donors. The oldest quilt being shown had been made in 1887.[6]

While smaller shows like the one in Colorado City may be more typical, its size by no means signifies the level of interest in quilting. Perhaps the largest quilting festival to be held in Texas offers a more accurate illustration of the level of interest in the art form. The 22nd Annual International Quilt Festival held in Houston in the fall of 1995 hosted more than 50,000 visitors from across the United States and 25 foreign countries. In addition to these visitors, the show had 370 quiltmakers

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[5]Lubbock Avalanche-Journal (Texas), 1 April 1997.

[6]Abilene Reporter-News (Texas), 20 September 1997.

competing for $55,000 in cash prizes, and some 3,000 registrants participating in lectures, classes, and seminars. A similar show is held biannually by the Austin guild. It offers 375 quilts on display, a judged competition, and 40 vendors.[7]

While shows such as the one in Houston have definitely taken quilting beyond the traditional neighborhood quilting circle, the changes do not end merely with expanding displays and lecture series. The interest in quilting has gone beyond these boundaries to find a place in magazines, television shows, cruise ships, and even on the Internet. During the 1970s, magazines began being published that were devoted entirely to quilts and quilting.[8] This trend has continued into the 1990s with yet another aspect being added, television. Sew Many Quilts is not only a magazine, but a popular public television series that airs in nine different Texas cities (and various stations throughout the United States). Promoters have also tried to "cash in" on the quilting craze by enticing novice quilters into learning the art through such gimmicks as offering quilting cruises. Such trips combine vacation time with the chance to learn a new hobby, and often boast classes being taught by a

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[7]Joel Horton, "Quilting: Piecing Together Past and Present, Traditional Quilting Takes a New Form," Texas Co-op Power, 53 (October 1996): 9-10.

[8]Suzanne Yabsley, Texas Quilts, Texas Women (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1984), 40.

renowned quilting author in order to attract skilled and beginning artisans alike.[9]

Perhaps the biggest change in quilting, however, has taken place because of computer technology. During the 1990s, quilting enthusiast could easily find a number of web pages on the Internet that served their interests. Some web sites were simply membership forms through which quilters could join such organizations as The National Quilting Association, Inc. Other sites, however, listed books on quilting, ranging from non-fiction, how-to works to fictional works that revolve around stories of quilters and quilting parties. Some of the quilting pages were used simply to relay a more personal account of how that person became interested in quilting.

The use of electronic mail, however, has helped to change the mechanics of the old-fashioned quilting party the most. Women in the 1990s began to use the Internet as a means to exchange quilting information and stretch the boundaries of their quilting circles across continents. Although these cross continent members cannot meet regularly to do the actual quilting, they still feel a sense of cohesion and group involvement through the information that they share.

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[9]Wanda Butler, "Sea and Sew: A First-Time Quilter Sets Sail for Fun, Sun, and a Great Quilting Adventure," Sew Many Quilts, May 1997, 24-25.

Marcia Kaylakie provides a prime example of an "Internet quilter." Kaylakie resides in Austin, Texas, but through the use of Internet access, she has contact with other quilters in California and all the way to Australia. These women contact each other to exchange completed quilt blocks, design information, and to decide on the next pattern to be quilted. Only after all the blocks are completed will these electronic quilting partners (at least the ones who live close enough to each other) meet to piece the blocks together into a quilt.[10]

While the trends and means of conducting a quilting have changed drastically, one thing has not changed from the early days of Texas to the 1990s, and that is the sheer enjoyment achieved by quilting. As "Internet quilter" Marcia Kaylakie stated, "Everyone enjoys creating something. There is nothing more satisfying to me than looking at a beautifully artistic quilt and saying: 'I did that.'"[11] Other late twentieth century quilters share Kaylakie's sentiments. West Texas quilter Alice Kidd had similar feelings about the quilts she has created. Kidd noted that she also enjoyed quilting because,"It is a way to preserve our heritage."[12]

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[10]Horton, "Quilting," Texas Co-op Power, 53 (October 1996): 7-8.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Alice Kidd, interview by author, 17 October 1997, Lubbock, Texas, conversation.

Clearly the art of quilting for these "modern" women is an enjoyable pastime. If they did not enjoy creating a decorative cover to use on a bed or simply hang on a wall, they would not continue to invest the great amount of time and effort required to create a quilt. Gone are the days when every scrap of fabric had to be used, and yet, quilting seems to have grown in popularity. The fact that quilting has survived in a time of economic stability for most Texans truly demonstrates the value placed on the art of quilting.

Unlike so many other duties relegated to a Texas pioneer woman, quilting provided a chance to create something of beauty for a sparsely furnished home. For the slave, creating a quilt was one of the few means that a woman had to provide a material good for her family. During the Great Depression, quilting offered women a way to help ease the strain on the household budget. In all of these instances, quilting provided the women with one of the few acceptable means to help provide for their families. Although other daily chores such as cooking and cleaning helped support the family unit, quilting was one of the few tasks that, once completed, lasted and could be used and admired. Through these hard times, completing a quilt offered these women a rare sense of satisfaction, accomplishment, and pride.

Beyond this personal accomplishment, quilting allowed these women to work as a group and exchange artistic ideas

and knowledge. Through quilting bees, groups, and clubs, the women were able to support not only their own families, but their communities as well. Since quilting as a group produced an actual, useful good, these gatherings were accepted as a legitimate work environment. This acceptance afforded the women a chance to come together that they might not have had otherwise. They were then able to exchange ideas and share sentiments beyond the realm of quilting. Group quilting had provided them a support group during a span of time when gathering merely for a chance to visit would have been considered an unacceptable waste of time under most other circumstances.

Truly quilting held special meaning for the pioneer, slave, and Depression era women of Texas. To the women who lived through the difficulties of settling a frontier, enduring bondage, and surviving economic turmoil, quilting served almost as a coping mechanism, allowing the quilters a chance to meet the social and emotional needs they were lacking due to their difficult living conditions. The craft also afforded the quilter a chance to provide for the welfare of her family. Clearly quilting became a "complete" artform for these women allowing them to care for not only their own needs, but their families' needs as well.

These women have left a legacy behind through not only the quilts they created, but the skills that they have passed on to succeeding generations. Although the quilting

careers of these women may have begun because of a need to conserve during hard times, the results of their efforts tell a different story. The quilts they left were the result of planning and artistic design. Clearly, they took pride in their creations. In the end, they had not only created something of value, they had also created for themselves a sense of value. These quilts were not a mere bedcover, or just a work of art. They were an acknowledgement of a woman's talent and skill.

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