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4-1-2009

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Gilbertson, Laurann, "Religion and Norwegian-American Quilts" (2009). *Proceedings of the 4th Biennial Symposium of the International Quilt Study Center & Museum.* Paper 3.
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Presented at the 4th Biennial Symposium of the International Quilt Study Center & Museum:
The Global Quilt: Cultural Contexts, Lincoln, Nebraska, April 2-4, 2009.
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Religion and Norwegian-American Quilts

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Quilts and quiltmaking have been closely connected to the religious identities of Norwegian-American women and to churches in the Midwest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Lutheran Church was an important institution, socially as well as religiously, for many Norwegian-American families. Through *Kvindeforening*, or Ladies Aid, women learned to make quilts, practiced English, built and maintained social relationships, and sold quilts and textiles to fund local, national, and global projects.

Immigrant women followed the churches' teachings to avoid ostentatiousness by making quilts that, in the early years, were more modestly beautiful. Some quilts made by devout Norwegian Americans show evidence of faith in imagery and language with embroidered scenes from the Bible and Bible verses in Norwegian.

Some quilts are best understood within a religious context, like temperance quilts and fundraising quilts that became cherished records of church members because theological disputes were splitting congregations and communities.

This presentation explores quilts made by Norwegian immigrants and their descendants within the framework of religion. I will focus on quilts made by women in the American Midwest before about 1935. I've used published and unpublished diaries, letters, and memoirs, as well as the histories of artifacts in collections such as Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum in Decorah, Iowa.

Between 1825 and 1980, nearly one million Norwegians left for America. Most settled in the Midwestern states of Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.[1] The peak years of emigration were 1866 to 1929.[2]

The majority of Norwegians left for economic reasons, but the first organized ship-full left in 1825 for religious freedom. The passengers were Quakers and could not legally practice in Norway, which was under a state Lutheran church. In the United States, many Norwegian immigrants remained Lutherans, but there were also Quakers, Methodists, and Mormons, as well as non-practicing and non-religious people. Today, though, I will focus on the Norwegian-American Lutheran experience and quilts.

Most Norwegian-American Lutheran churches had Ladies Aid Societies. Textile production was an important part of Ladies Aid, and was, in fact, the reason some of the first women's organizations formed. Diderikke Ottesen Brandt began a sewing society with members of her church in Decorah, Iowa, in 1865. She invited some of the women to her home, the parsonage, to knit socks and mend clothing for the students at Luther College.[3] Similarly in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1879, women met to knit and mend for seminary students. A. C. Anderson, the student that suggested the idea of the group, conducted devotions during the biweekly work meetings.[4]

The format of the Madison group's meetings was typical of Ladies Aid societies throughout the Midwest in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Though the names of the groups changed over time, from *Syforening* to *Kvindeforening* to Ladies Aid to Mission Society, the goals were the same: to raise money through dues, meals, and sales of textiles to benefit the church and its works. Christian education and fellowship were also important so the pastor, the pastor's wife, or the sexton (or *klokker*) gave devotions or Bible readings at Ladies Aid meetings.

Several scholars have researched the complex history of Ladies Aid in the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church, but they have neglected the textiles and their important role in the success of the churches and communities.[5] For many congregations textiles, and especially quilts, were the primary way of raising money for projects that ranged from church buildings and local parochial schools to regional hospitals and foreign missions. Ingeborg Sabu Hanson appliquéd this quilt top or spread for an 1870 Ladies Aid raffle.[6] Her sister Anna held the winning ticket. We don't know how much the raffle brought in, but the funds were used to help build the Cedar Valley Lutheran Church. Like Cedar Valley, many congregations had Ladies Aids before they had church buildings.

Some aids gave textiles directly to the needy, but it was much more common for textiles to be sold to members of the community at Ladies Aid sales. Aid members sewed aprons, men's shirts and work clothes, and children's dresses as well as pillow cases, piecework quilts, crib quilts, and rugs. A large number of Ladies Aid textiles were sewn by hand or machine from purchased cloth. Some women preferred to spin and knit rather than sew. The Kittleson family of rural Henry, South Dakota, often supplied wool from their sheep for batting for quilts made by the Ladies Aid of Our Savior's Lutheran Church. [7]

The time of year that Ladies Aids held sales varied. For some groups it was a summer event and for others it was always at Thanksgiving. Here are members of Trefoldighed (later Trinity) Lutheran Church of Dawson, Minnesota, after their Thanksgiving dinner and bazaar in about 1900.

Some congregations also formed organizations for young women called *Pikeforening*, Girls Aid, or Little Helpers. The aim of the Little Helpers of Perry Lutheran Church near Daleyville, Wisconsin, was typical of these groups: create an interest in missions, provide a good social time, and provide "able instruction in domestic art and in Christian literature and singing."[8] The projects made by Girls Aids were also sold at bazaars. The Pikeforening at Arendahl Lutheran Church near Peterson, Minnesota, raised $235 in 1902 from quilts and other textiles. The funds went toward a new organ for the church.[9]

Aid was a place for adults and children to learn and practice quiltmaking, to socialize, practice the English language, try American food, preserve Norwegian language and food, and fundraise.

Ladies Aid quilts are perhaps best known as being signature quilts, such as this one with the names of pioneer members of Highland Lutheran Church embroidered on rectangles at the center of each crazy block.[10] Often church members and others paid a small amount to have their names embroidered on the quilt. Then the quilt would be raffled or auctioned off. It was usually a group effort to write, embroider, piece, and quilt the finished textile, but one name is associated with a Hearts and Gizzards quilt, sold at a Ladies Aid sale at Waterloo Ridge Lutheran Church.[11] The donor of the quilt and community members agree that Lena Wernson was solely responsible for creating it.

Some American quiltmakers used obvious machine stitching to proudly show off new sewing machines and some Norwegian Americans did as well.[12] But it

was not in the Norwegian character to "brag." The early immigrants were especially likely to hold to this belief, which was reinforced by church teachings to avoid ostentatiousness in behavior and dress. "…the plainer the costume," it was said, "the more pleasing to the Almighty."[13] The quilts made from leftover dress fabric or recycled clothing may have been more somber. A crazy quilt in Vesterheim's collection was said to have been made from pieces of female ancestors' clothing from the four generations preceding its completion in 1924.[14]

Pastors preached sermons against vanity in dress.[15] The pastor made a direct remark to Marta Hovland of rural Blanchardville, Wisconsin, that she, a mother of small children, should not be so interested in new ribbons.[16] Laurence Larson described the public opinion in Forest City, Iowa: "We believed with the [Pastor] that all is vanity, and strove to suppress the promoting of pride and all its related sins, especially when it appeared in other households."[17] So if immigrant households were under scrutiny as well, the quilts made from new fabric may also have been more modest. By the late nineteenth century, though, the Norwegian Lutheran Church had greatly relaxed its views against vanity.

Men could express and work with their faith as pastors, lay preachers, and *klokkers*. Women had fewer opportunities to publicly express their faith. The primary way was to work for the church through Ladies Aid. Some women expressed their faith more privately and literally. Helena Monson Rossing created a crazy quilt dressing gown in about 1900 that is now in the Vesterheim collection.[18] She embroidered Bible verses in Norwegian and in English on some of the solid-color fabrics. Helena was born in Drammen, Norway, while her family was en route to America.[19] She grew up in Lafayette County, Wisconsin, and in 1869 married Lars or Lewis Rossing, an immigrant from eastern Norway. Lewis opened a dry goods store in Argyle, Wisconsin, and Helena added a millinery department. The Rossings had three children: Son Hjalmar and twins Victor and Viola.

There are 20 embroidered sayings on the robe, most are in Norwegian. Fourteen are quotes from the Bible. One is the title of a hymn and four are expressions, like "Wait for the Lord," and "No cross, no crown." Did Helena make the robe for herself? The family spoke Norwegian at home and attended Norwegian-language church services. Was it a wedding present for long-time housekeeper Katie Thompson, who the family described as "very religious?" Or did Helena

make the robe for her daughter Viola (b. 1889) as a confirmation gift or to take to college at Lutheran Ladies Seminary in Red Wing, Minnesota?

Donald Berg, a retired Lutheran pastor living in Decorah, Iowa, and a man that knows his Bible equally well in Norwegian and English, looked at the inscriptions, helped identify and translate them. He felt that the use of Bible verses and the types of verses connects the robe to confirmation. These are the types of verses, he said, assigned to or chosen by confirmands to learn as part of their religious education.[20] Confirmation is a public profession of faith and the rite in which adolescents become adult members of the church. So the robe was likely a gift from Helena to her daughter Viola in encouragement and celebration of this important personal and religious event.

A wool hourglass quilt in the collection of the International Quilt Study Center also has religious sayings in Norwegian.[21] Each square and triangle has freehand embroidery or text embroidered in silk floss. The maker is unknown, the specific origin is unknown, though it was made in the United States. Once again, I asked Pastor Berg to help. Using photos sent by Carolyn Ducey, Donald and I scrutinized each inscription. These are not Bible verses. Many are "moralisms" and several are admonitions, like "You must love Jesus."[22] They sound very pietistic suggesting the maker attended a church in the Hauge Synod, the "low church" body that promoted active and personal religious experience. One inscription tells us a little about the maker: "Today I am 78" and one inscription tell us about the person that received the quilt: "It is to my daughter's daughter Marjorie Margrete from your grandmother 1898." Unfortunately the handwriting and embroidery style are very difficult to read and in combination with wear and poor spelling, we were unable to distinguish more than portions of most inscriptions.

Language is a recurring theme in Norwegian-American culture, women's history, and quilts. Immigrants continued to speak Norwegian in the United States – at home, at church, and with their Norwegian friends and neighbors. Later generations often learned and used Norwegian at home, at parochial summer school, and at church (until about the 1920s). If the person was confirmed in the Norwegian language, she had to read and memorize entire religious texts. Therefore she would be able to easily recite (and inscribe onto quilts) Bible verses, passages from sermons, and other religious phrases. The Norwegian language persisted longest when it came to matters of faith. Even if a person could attend

school, conduct business, or read newspapers in English, their entire religious vocabulary was in Norwegian. And, as Elsie Hjellen explained the situation for her immigrant grandmother: "I can well understand that her Christ spoke Norwegian."[23]

Pictures tell a thousand words and in any language. We have at Vesterheim a Bible History Quilt.[24] Ruby Short McKim designed patterns for 24 stories from the Old Testament and the patterns were published weekly in newspapers in 1927. Pastor Gilbert Paulsrud purchased the quilt for his family at a Ladies Aid sale that year. In 1929, he bid on this Hole in the Barn Door quilt to give to his daughter Marguerite as a wedding present.[25] He was outbid. Both he and his daughter were heartbroken – until the winning bidder presented the quilt as a gift. Marguerite cherished the quilt and only used it on special occasions. For everyday, she used this friendship quilt.[26] The Ladies Aid made it in her parlor at the parsonage in Bagley, Minnesota. The Ladies Aid intended the quilt for sale, but as it was the Depression, no one would have any money. They gladly gave it to the Rossings instead.

A type of quilt that needs to be explored through the context of religion is temperance quilts. There was a strong religious condemnation of drunkenness.[27] Norwegian-American women in many communities were members of a local temperance league or the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in order to fight against liquor and saloons. Norwegian-born Ulrikka Feldtmann Bruun traveled for WCTU throughout the Midwest organizing Scandinavian women. Andrew Volstead, U.S. Congressman from Minnesota and son of Norwegian immigrants, sponsored the National Prohibition Act, also known as the Volstead Act.[28] However, many Norwegian-Americans disapproved of these organized efforts because they took away the alcoholic's will to abstain, they didn't view drunkenness as a sin, and they didn't use the words of God enough.[29] So although there are temperance quilts that were made to promote and fundraise for WCTU (often in blue and white fabric, in Drunkard's Path, "T", or goblet patterns), it is as likely as not that some would be made by Norwegian-American quiltmakers.

Church quilts with signatures were very often made for fundraisers as we've seen. Some were gifts to long-time presidents of Ladies Aid or beloved pastors and their families as a record and memento of the church community. When Pas-

tor R. O. Brandt was called to serve a church in Wisconsin, the congregation at Highland Lutheran Church (which he had founded) created a friendship quilt for him to take along.[30]

Signature quilts were cherished even more as theological disputes tore apart churches and communities. The Predestination Controversy was the most bitter. Was the individual believer predestined by God to be saved or was the individual saved by deeds and actions? It seems a simple enough question, but pastors, congregations, and synods debated it for more than forty years. The debates were intense enough that many pastors and parishioners joined or founded different churches. Sigrid Lillehaugen of Whitman, North Dakota, explained the situation to her parents in Norway in a letter dated 1898. "It is getting worse and worse with this church strife. ... They also split up our little Ladies Aid. We were eight and now we are four on each side. ... It is sad that our own district people should act this way. Now we can have neither school nor church together."[31]

At about this time, Pastor Rasmus and Clara Holie purchased a signature quilt top or spread at their church sale.[32] It was used on their daughter Olga's bed for years. When Olga died her daughter Celeste placed it on the coffin to represent the community (social and religious) in which she was raised.

There is nothing unique about these quilts made by Ladies Aid societies, with signatures, Bible quotes, or scenes from the Bible, but when they are considered within a context of immigration and Lutheran church history, they illustrate a tight link between quilts and the religious identities of Norwegian Americans in the Midwest. Women could learn new skills, express their faith, and contribute to the success of their church and community – all through quilts.

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[1] Ingrid Semmingsen, *Norway to America: A History of the Migration*, trans. Einar Haugen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1978), 122.

[2] Odd S. Lovoll, *The Promise of America: A History of the Norwegian-American People* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 8, 26, 28.

[3] O. M. Norlie, O. A. Tingelstad, Karl T. Jacobsen, eds., *Luther College Through Sixty Years, 1861-1921* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1922), 471-72.

[4] Bethel Lutheran Church website, page on The History of Bethel Lutheran Women. http://www.bethel-madison.org/historyBLC%20Women.htm, accessed 31 May 2006.

[5] L. DeAne Lagerquist, *In America Men Milk the Cows: Factors of Gender, Ethnicity, and Religion in the Americanization of Norwegian-American Women* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1991); Erik Luther Williamson, "'Doing What Had To Be Done': Norwegian Lutheran Ladies Aid Societies of North Dakota," *North Dakota History 57* (Spring 1990); and Lori Ann Lahlum, "'Everything was changed and looked strange': Norwegian Women in South Dakota," *South Dakota History 35* (2005).

[6] Appliquéd quilt top or bedspread. Made by Ingeborg Sabu Hanson for Cedar Valley Church, Winona County, Minnesota, 1870. Vesterheim, 1979.119.002.

[7] Bella Anderson, letter to Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum, 28 July 1992

[8] C. O. Ruste, ed., *Sixty Years of Perry Congregation* (Northfield, MN: Mohn, 1915), 125.

[9] Ernest M. Maland, *Remember the Days of Old: The Centennial Saga of Arendahl Evangelical Lutheran Congregation, 1856-1956* (N.p.: Arendahl Evangelical Lutheran Church Centennial Committee, [1956]), 42-43.

[10] Crazy quilt with pioneer members' names for Highland Lutheran Church, rural Spring Grove, Minnesota, 1910. Vesterheim, 1980.082.001.

[11] Hearts and Gizzards quilt made for Waterloo Ridge Lutheran Church, rural Spring Grove, Minnesota, 1933. Vesterheim, 1986.081.001.

[12] Barbara Brackman, *Patterns of Progress: Quilts in the Machine Age* (Los Angeles: Autry Museum of Western Heritage, 1997), 21, 36; Frances Jeffers, personal communication, 29 April 2001.

[13] Laurence M. Larson, *The Log Book of a Young Immigrant* (Northfield, MN: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1939), 63.

[14] Calico crazy quilt made by Emma and Mary Grimland, New Hope, Wisconsin, 1924. Vesterheim, 1978.052.001.

[15] Jacob Hodnefield, "Iowa Life, 1875-1925: The Story of a Central Iowa Community of Norwegian Immigrants and Their Descendants," nd, 86. Norwegian-American Historical Association (NAHA), Jacob Hodnefield Collection, P1151.

[16] Edna Hovland Sardeson, "As I Remember." Typwritten manuscript, np, nd. NAHA, Edna Hovland Collection, P176.

[17] Larson 1939, 63.

[18] Crazy dressing gown made by Helena Monson Rossing, Argyle WI, ca. 1900. Vesterheim, 1992.079.001.

[19] Forell, Elizabeth R. *The Rossings and Their Store, 1870-1970*. Iowa City, IA: Author, nd.

[20] Pr. Donald Berg, personal communication, 7 January 2009.

[21] Hourglass quilt made in the United States, dated 1898. IQSC, 2005.027.0001.
[22] Ibid.

[23] Elsie Heiberg Hjellen, *As I Remember Besta, 1830-1924* (Np: np, [1984]), 5.

[24] Bible History Quilt sold at Bethel Lutheran Church sale, Story City, Iowa, 1927. Vesterheim, 1996.084.001.

[25] Hole in the Barn Door quilt made for Bethel Lutheran Church sale, Story City, Iowa, 1929. Vesterheim, 1992.036.001.

[26] Hexagons friendship quilt made by St. Paul Lutheran Church Ladies Aid, Bagley, Minnesota, 1935. Vesterheim, 1992.036.002. Phyllis Rossing Trytten, personal communication, 30 March 2009.

[27] Odd S. Lovoll, *Norwegians on the Prairie: Ethnicity and the Development of the Country Town* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2006), 220.

[28] Lovoll 2006, 222.

[29] Discussed at a congregational meeting at Glenwood Lutheran Church, March 20, 1879. In *Minutes of the Congregational Proceedings in Little Iowa Norwegian-Evangelical Lutheran Congregation and the Glenwood Congregation*, trans. Charlotte Jacobson (Decorah, IA: Anundsen Publishing Co., 1991), 80.

[30] Red and white Friendship quilt made by Highland Norwegian Lutheran Church, Brandt, South Dakota, 1900. Vesterheim, 1971.053.016.

[31] Theresse Nelson Lundby, Kristie Nelson-Neuhaus, and Ann Nordland Wallace, eds. *Live Well: The Letters of Sigrid Gjeldaker Lillehaugen* (St. Paul, MN: Western Home Books, 2004), 34.

[32] Child's signature bedspread made by Highland Lutheran Church Ladies Aid, Milnor, North Dakota, 1900. Vesterheim, 2000.029.006.

See also:
Laurann Gilbertson, "Patterns of the New World: Quiltmaking Among Norwegian Americans," *Uncoverings 2006*.

Laurann Gilbertson, "Textile Production in Norwegian America" in Betty Bergland and Lori Lahlum, eds. *Gendering Norwegian American History: Essays on Women, Communities and Identities* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press), forthcoming.