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PIECED IN THE PLAINS

KANSAS AMISH QUILTS AND CULTURAL ADAPTATION

JANNEKEN L. SMUCKER

was windy from south, we quilt all day.

— Gertrude Miller, Haven, Kansas, 1927

While the Old Order Amish are often thought of as the plain-dressing religious sect that attracts millions of tourists annually to Pennsylvania Dutch country, this Anabaptist group also has a significant history in the Great Plains. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Amish formed numerous

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settlements in Kansas. Some, like the one in Yoder, continue in existence today; others, like the settlement in Dodge City, have long since been abandoned. The Amish who settled in the Great Plains share commonalities with the Old Order Amish who remained in more established settlements farther east, as well as with other, non-Amish groups who settled in the Plains during the late nineteenth century. Quilts, one of the most well-known material manifestations of Amish culture, can serve as rich cultural documents of the Amish who settled in the Plains. With quilts as a lens into the cultural and religious life of these Kansas settlers, we can learn about the characteristics that distinguish this group from “English” (as the non-Amish are called by Amish insiders) settlers and from the Amish living farther east. Just as the experiences of people living in the major Amish settlements in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Indiana differ from those living in Kansas, so too do Kansas Amish quilts reflect

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the distinct history and lifestyle of those living in the Great Plains. By and large, the quilts made by the Kansas Amish have simply been lumped together with other midwestern Amish quilts and not thoroughly explored as distinct expressions of Amish culture.¹ At first glance, these quilts, like Amish residents living in the Plains, can be easily grouped together with other examples of midwestern Amish quilts. Through careful artifact analysis, however, new insight into both the artifacts themselves and the unique history and culture of the Amish living in Kansas can be revealed.

AMISH SETTLEMENTS IN KANSAS

During the Protestant Reformation of sixteenth-century Europe, the Swiss Brethren, also known as the Anabaptists, emerged as a radical religious group. Later called Mennonites, these reformers sought a strict separation of church and state, practiced voluntary adult baptism rather than infant baptism, and refused to participate in the military because it ran counter to their view of Christ's teachings of peaceful nonviolence.² The Amish separated from the Mennonites in seventeenth-century Europe as a result of differences in discipline practices. Those desiring a stricter practice of shunning church members who digressed from the group were led by Jacob Amman, for whom the Amish were named. Amish groups began migrating to eastern Pennsylvania in the eighteenth century to seek relief from the religious persecution and economic hardships of Europe.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Amish gradually moved west, as did great numbers of the mainstream American population. The first Amish settler in Reno County, Kansas, the location of two of the only existing Amish settlements in the state, likely was Eli Yoder, who migrated from Pennsylvania in 1874. Yoder founded a small town in the center of the state, named it after himself, and eventually established a post office in his own home. This first Amish settler soon married a non-Amish woman and left the

church.³ Other Amish families did not arrive until 1883. Seeking cheap land, group isolation, and religious freedom, four Amish families from Shelby County, Illinois, ventured west by train with the intention of settling in Nebraska.⁴ When high water prevented this, a Hutchinson land agent persuaded them to come to Reno County where they settled in Yoder, Haven, and Partridge.⁵ In subsequent years, dozens of families, many moving from communities in northern Indiana, joined this initial group.⁶

David Wagler's "History and Change of the Amish of Reno County, Kansas," one of the only recorded histories of the Kansas Amish, relies on oral history interviews with members of the Amish community. Wagler notes that Amish folks settled in Kansas for a variety of reasons, from cheap land to temperance. Because the Kansas settlements were "comprised of people with such a variety of motives for coming, and isolated from all of the large Amish communities, the Kansas group provided a logical setting for innovations. They were not long in coming."⁷ Indeed, the Kansas Amish eventually adopted amenities and organizations considered taboo in many more-established Amish settlements, including Sunday school, modern farm equipment, and limited use of automobiles. The challenges of increased innovation and rapid cultural adaptation also spurred several more-progressive offshoot groups. By 1968 there were six church groups in the vicinity of Yoder whose membership consisted primarily of descendants of early Amish settlers in Reno County.⁸ These more-liberal groups split from the Old Order for a variety of reasons including the use of telephones, the desire for high-wire electricity, adoption of church meetinghouses rather than the traditional Sunday services held in homes, debate over the continued use of High German in church services, the ownership of cars, and the desire to sing gospel music.⁹ The presence of these more-liberal offshoot groups also served to keep the Old Order population from increasing substantially; there were more-liberal groups to join when problems within

the Old Order arose. In addition, members who were opposed to the adoption of modern technologies and cultural practices often returned to their “mother” settlements in Indiana and Iowa in order to renew the church discipline.¹⁰

D. Paul Miller discusses additional outside factors that affected the Amish settlements in Reno County. Oil was discovered in Reno County in 1936, prompting some Amish farmers to sell their farms to drillers and move to settlements farther east, while other Amish families faced criticism for staying and reaping monetary rewards for the oil found in their fields.¹¹ A number of Amish families who viewed their religion as compromised moved away from the area simply to avoid dealing with the greed and worldliness the oil fields would likely bring.¹² A few years later, additional Amish families were forced to resettle when a United States Navy air base was built on 2,500 acres of farmland west of Yoder.¹³ These outside forces, coupled with the progressive splinter groups formed as the result of schisms within the Old Order, resulted in a small population of Old Order Amish living in Kansas. Those that remained persevered in their desire to live within the bounds of their *Ordnung*, the guidelines that govern Amish living within each community, despite the many challenges offered by the land and environment of the Great Plains.

AMISH QUILTMaking

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, a slow “sorting-out” process, or gradual schism, occurred within the Amish communities in various geographical locations; those most resistant to change emerged as the Old Order Amish.¹⁴ The other group that formed at this time was known as the Amish-Mennonites. Eventually most Amish-Mennonites became affiliated with the Mennonite Church, which today is considered the most progressive rung on the Anabaptist ladder. During and after the tumultuous years of schism, something prompted Amish women to adopt the quilt-

making practices of their neighbors. Whereas mainstream Americans were making quilts as early as the eighteenth century, evidence from estate inventories and journals suggests that up until the late nineteenth century, Amish likely used woven coverlets and feather ticks as bedding, the practice of many early German immigrants.¹⁵ The Amish newcomers to quilting developed their own culturally distinct form that was “in the world, but not of it,” a New Testament concept often used to describe the Amish lifestyle (1 Pet. 2:11).¹⁶ Perhaps years of division within the church prompted a codification of Amish quiltmaking practices that served as a means of boundary maintenance, similar to an increased rigidity in dress practices that prohibited gaily colored or printed clothing.¹⁷ In midwestern Amish communities the result was quilts pieced with repeating blocks in simple geometric patterns, often similar to those used by the “English” (Fig. 1 is a good example of this format). While their “English” neighbors pieced quilts with the wide array of printed calico fabric available in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Amish quiltmakers exclusively used solid-colored fabrics. Amish quiltmaking styles generally lagged several decades behind those of the mainstream; Amish quilt researcher Eve Wheatcroft Granick notes that “the inherently conservative nature of Amish culture permits change only in relationship to the larger outside society. What has been discarded by other American women as being out of fashion is then acceptable for possible adaptation in the Amish community.”¹⁸

When Kansas first opened to settlement in 1854, settlers were encouraged to bring bedding west with them, as such supplies were hard to come by on the frontier.¹⁹ For this reason, many of the oldest quilts registered in the Kansas State Quilt Project were not made in Kansas but were brought with the pioneers who settled here in the nineteenth century.²⁰ Twenty to thirty years later, when the first communities of Amish began to settle in Kansas, they too would have likely brought bedding

with them. Because of the relatively late genesis of Amish quiltmaking in all geographic areas, these early settlers may not have had fully developed quiltmaking practices to bring along with them. For this reason, Kansas Amish quiltmaking traditions probably did not fully develop until a sustainable community was formed in the early twentieth century. The Amish living in Kansas may not have made quilts until additional Amish settlers arrived, bringing quiltmaking practices from mother settlements with them, while increased interaction prompted adoption and adaptation of the practices of their neighbors. As with Amish quiltmaking in general, the precise genesis of Kansas quiltmaking practices is difficult to pinpoint.

In studying a related religious group, Sara Reimer Farley has attempted to trace the origin of Kansas Mennonite quiltmaking. German-speaking Mennonites arrived from colonies in Russia and the Ukraine in the 1870s and 1880s, coinciding with the arrival of the first Amish groups. No known quiltmaking practices traveled with these emigrants, yet the earliest Russian Mennonite quilt found in Kansas was likely begun around 1880 by a woman who arrived just a few years prior.²¹ The Russian Mennonites, like the Amish, had a relatively closed community that was separated from the mainstream not only by faith and history but also by language. Farley suggests that early contact with English-speaking neighbors spread the art of quiltmaking to Russian Mennonite women familiar with needlework and thus able to make the transition to a new craft.²² Cultural assimilation, however, occurred at a faster rate among these Mennonites than it did among the Old Order Amish.

In addition to extant quilts, the diary entries of Gertrude Miller of Haven, Kansas, are also a testament to the importance and regularity of quiltmaking within a Kansas Amish woman's life. In her 1927 entries, a month progresses from cutting blocks, to "stickering" (likely a colloquialism for piecing), to quilting. These tasks are listed in her diary among

other chores, including churning, butchering hens, making pies, and ironing. During February and March, Gertrude worked on various aspects of quiltmaking at least once a week, and in many weeks more often. She often worked with relatives and twice during this period hosted a quilting party where a number of women joined her.²³ For these Kansas Amish women, quiltmaking was a regular activity and likely an important aspect of their household chores.

QUILT ANALYSIS

In the past several decades, both fine and decorative art historians have established models for examining objects in order to determine their cultural significance, with the goals of "broadening the definition of appropriate objects for study [and] exploring more far-ranging cultural issues."²⁴ In his groundbreaking essay "Artifact Study: A Proposed Model," E. McClung Fleming identifies five properties to be examined in the study of objects: history, material, construction, design, and function.²⁵ Through a process of four operations—Identification, Evaluation, Cultural Analysis, and Interpretation—Fleming advocates examination of an artifact in terms of these five properties.

Fleming's model is typically used to examine an individual object, as Linda Welters and Margaret Ordoñez do in their study of a New England quilt in their essay "Early Calico Printing in Rhode Island."²⁶ In this current study, using a modified version of the model constructed by Fleming, I have examined seven Kansas Amish quilts from the Sara Miller Collection of Amish crib quilts, part of the collections of the International Quilt Study Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.²⁷ Rather than discussing each quilt individually, I will discuss the quilts en masse in terms of each of Fleming's five properties, using data derived from Fleming's four operations.²⁸ Such a small sampling of quilts is not an adequate means of drawing generalizations about the quiltmaking practices of this group;

however, these quilts can be used as springboards for exploring many facets of this distinct religious group and its existence in the Great Plains.

PROPERTY 1: HISTORY

Unfortunately, the stories many Amish quilts could tell have been lost as they enter the world of antique dealers and art collectors. This is indeed the case for the majority of quilts in the Sara Miller Collection. Two quilts with a likely Kansas origin have, however, retained a story: a bit of folklore passed on from the family to the dealer, to the collector, and eventually to the International Quilt Study Center. The red Baskets quilt (Fig. 1) was made by a Mrs. Amos Bontrager for her daughter. Unfortunately, this Mrs. Bontrager died while still a young mother. Later, her daughter made a Flower Garden quilt, the pieced hexagon pattern popular among the "English" during the 1930s. Her stepmother, the second Mrs. Amos Bontrager, pieced a Diamonds quilt (Fig. 2) for her step-grandchild using the scraps from the Flower Garden quilt. The diamond shape could have been the leftover fabric piece formed when two adjacent hexagons were cut.

Because of the nature of the Amish community, it is difficult to confirm this story by simply tracing genealogical records. Bontrager, like Yoder, Miller, and Schlabach, is a very common name among the Old Order Amish, particularly in the Kansas settlement where this quilt was likely made. The story, however, confirms both the precariousness of life in the Great Plains and the Amish commitment to family. The small Amish cemetery on Red Rock Road between Yoder and Haven, Kansas, in Reno County attests to the hardships of frontier life and the great numbers of Bontragers who lived in the area and died at a young age.²⁹ Such cemeteries are the only remnant of eight settlements established by the Amish throughout Kansas that did not survive past the first half of the twentieth century.³⁰ The practice of a widowed husband quickly remarrying in order to provide a mother for his children

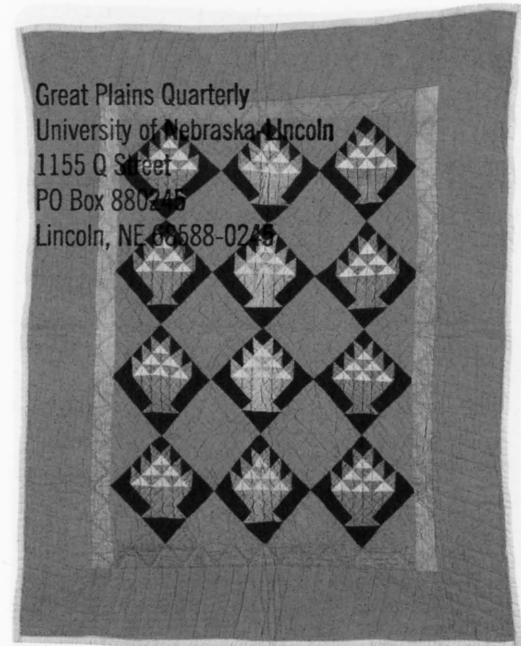


FIG. 1. *Baskets*, by Mrs. Amos Bontrager (first wife), c. 1900-20. Probably made in Haven, Kansas. International Quilt Study Center, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Sara Miller Collection, 2000.007.0030.

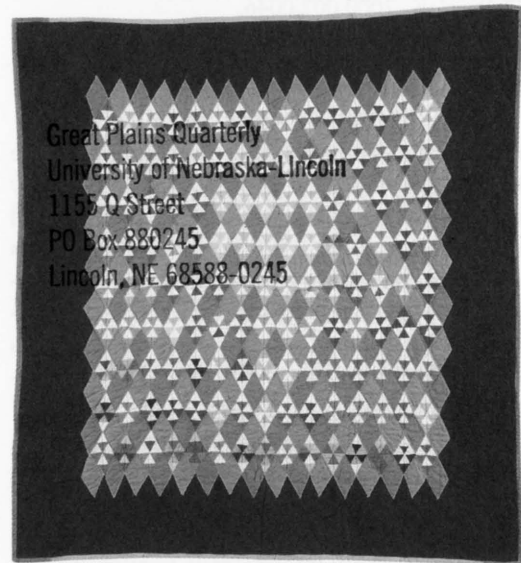


FIG. 2. *Diamonds*, by Mrs. Amos Bontrager (second wife), c. 1930-50. Probably made in Haven, Kansas. International Quilt Study Center, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Sara Miller Collection, 2000.007.0047.



FIG. 3. *Log Cabin variation*, maker unknown, c. 1910-30. Possibly made in Indiana; acquired in Kansas. International Quilt Study Center, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Sara Miller Collection, 2000.007.0046.

was not an uncommon occurrence among the Old Order Amish. The importance of family is also reflected in the Bontrager story attached to these two quilts. John A. Hostetler notes that Amish quilting “underscores the importance of the transgenerational family,” particularly when quilts such as this Diamonds example were given as symbols of familial affection.³¹

The Log Cabin-variation quilt pictured in Figure 3 is a particularly unusual Amish quilt in its construction and design. The precision and symmetry characteristic of many Amish quilts is lacking. Were it not for a strikingly similar quilt pictured in Eve Wheatcroft Granick’s seminal text *The Amish Quilt*, one might assume that this skewed Log Cabin was an anomaly.³² The quilt pictured in Granick’s

book has an Indiana provenance. The similarities between the two quilts—the irregular angles of the logs, use of drab olive, blue, and gray fabrics, and the strip-pieced outer border—suggest that perhaps these two unusual quilts have a shared origin. Pairs of similar quilts are not rare; sometimes identical or similar quilts were made by sisters or by a mother for multiple children.³³ These quilts may have once been a pair that became separated when one sister married and moved to Reno County from northern Indiana, as young brides often did.

For women who may have been less than eager to move west, a quilt with a particular connection to a sister or friend may have indeed carried special significance. Some young wives were known to complain about the prospect of moving to Kansas: “If only those land agents would stay away and leave us alone,” one late-nineteenth-century Amish woman was recorded to have said about the shrewd tactics used to convince Amish men to make the trek west.³⁴ A quilt that traveled west with a young woman might serve as a souvenir from home, a reminder of life in a well-established, conforming community, rather than the isolated life experienced by women transplanted to the Plains. Many Kansas quilts, made by Amish and “English” alike, may have served this function. In Barbara Brackman’s study of Kansas quilts, she surmises that for women settling in the Plains, “living hundreds of miles from family, friends, and home, quilts held meaning far beyond mere utility.”³⁵ The Kansas State Quilt Project documented a significant number of quilts that were not made in Kansas but were brought with women when they migrated west.³⁶

PROPERTY 2: MATERIAL

Unlike in other more-established Amish communities, Kansas Amish quiltmakers tended to exclusively use cotton fabrics to make their quilts. Cotton was the predominant choice among Amish quiltmakers throughout the Midwest, but quiltmakers in

Indiana, Ohio, and Illinois often interspersed bits of wool and wool/cotton mixtures into their pieced designs. Six of the seven Kansas quilts in the Sara Miller Collection are made entirely of cotton while the seventh, a Log Cabin, contains just a bit of wool fabric and has a distinct link to Indiana (see "Property 1" above, Fig. 3). Absence of these more expensive dress wools and the elsewhere-popular sateen (a cotton satin weave fabric with a distinct sheen) indicates the economic status of the Kansas Amish. Amish quilt researcher Granick hypothesizes that the choice of fabric reflects the economic reality of the Kansas Amish community: "In Kansas . . . families were faced with the task of developing new land. Quiltmaking was still an important tradition, but time and money were directed primarily toward the goal of establishing farms. . . . Even in the twentieth century, as these communities gained strength, the issue of economics remained important."³⁷ By the beginning of the twentieth century, Amish women elsewhere would have been settled into a comfortable economic situation where buying fine fabrics such as sateen specifically for quiltmaking was possible. The situation was different in Kansas; here life was harder due to the physical challenges of the land and environment. Consequently, these seven quilts are predominantly pieced from simple, plain-weave muslins and broadcloths; cotton sateens and fine dress wools remained beyond their means. The Stars quilt pictured in Figure 4 features some chambray, a multipurpose plain-weave fabric woven with a colored warp yarn and a white filling. Granick cites an 1895 fabric merchant's advertisement placed in the *Sugarcreek Budget*, an Ohio newspaper read nationally by the Amish, that listed "best chambray" at 10-¹/₂ cents per yard, compared to plain calico at 4 and 5 cents per yard.³⁸ "Cashmere, half wool," likely a wool/cotton mixture, was advertised at prices three times as high as plain calico.³⁹

Some quiltmakers bought fabric from traveling fabric salesmen from Shipshewana, Indiana, from near where many young Amish



FIG. 4. Stars, maker unknown, c. 1920-40. Possibly made in Haven, Kansas. International Quilt Study Center, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Sara Miller Collection, 2000.007.0032.

women left to venture to the Great Plains with a new husband.⁴⁰ This fabric, as well as the contact with the salesman from back home, was a link to the community the women had left behind. While many "English" also left behind familiar surroundings in order to settle in the Great Plains, the Amish emphasis on community, as defined by the German word *Gemeinde*, may have made the transition to a new, isolated environment even more difficult. *Gemeinde* instilled a sense of uniformity and conformity among the members of the Amish church; as Amish sociologist Hostetler summarizes, "Every Amish person knows the accepted way of doing things."⁴¹ Without the stability of the community and its *Ordnung*, the guidelines that govern living within the community, a member of the church might feel lost. Quilts and quiltmaking practices from home, including the materials informally sanctioned by the *Ordnung*, may have provided a



FIG. 5. *Stars*, maker unknown, c. 1900-1920. Possibly made in Hutchinson, Kansas. International Quilt Study Center, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Sara Miller Collection, 2000.007.0005.

sense of *Gemeinde* that was hard to find in the Plains.

An acknowledgment of the importance of the mother settlements, the older Amish communities from which Kansas settlers came, is reflected in the colors used in many Kansas quilts. The bold red fabrics used in the *Baskets* (Fig. 1) and *Lost Ships* quilts likely reflect the particular fondness Indiana Amish women had for the color. Red was not permissible for dresses but red fabric was bought expressly for making quilts.⁴² While some quiltmakers may have specifically chosen brightly colored fabrics to add joy to their surroundings, other quiltmakers may have instead embraced the colors readily found in the Plains. The tan and blue fabrics used to make the *Stars* quilt (Fig. 5) reflect the color combination of the blue sky and the prairie, as do the fabrics used to piece the baskets in the *Baskets* quilt (Fig. 1).

PROPERTY 3: CONSTRUCTION

Amish quilts from all settlements have traditionally been pieced using simple geometric designs; in midwestern communities, quiltmakers most often made quilts with repeating block patterns. Granick estimates that the Amish groups in the Midwest commonly used approximately twenty-five quilt patterns.⁴³ Piecing is the technique of attaching together pieces of fabric, often squares or triangles, to form a geometric design. The limitations of piecing were well suited to the Amish prohibition against representational images as commanded by the Old Testament scripture, "You shall not make for yourself a graven image or a likeness of anything" (Exod. 20:4).⁴⁴ For this reason, appliqué, the technique of sewing a decorative piece of fabric on top of a base fabric to create a representational design not easily achieved by piecing geometric shapes together, was not often used by Amish quiltmakers. In addition, frugal and ever-practical Amish quiltmakers may have considered covering up one layer of fabric with a second a wasteful practice. At least one Kansas Amish quiltmaker skirted this guideline for Amish quilting and utilized appliqué in her creation of a *Baskets* quilt that features curved handles on 30 miniature baskets. In her adaptation of a borrowed "English" pattern, she modified the appliqué technique necessary to create the basket handles found on each block. Rather than adopting the mainstream "English" practice of using tiny, hidden hand-appliqué stitches, this quiltmaker machine-stitched the handles down with dark thread. This approach kept the quiltmaker free from the sins of pride and wastefulness but allowed her to use the pattern that required appliqué.

This quiltmaker navigated an issue similar to those faced by Amish farmers in the Great Plains. Unlike in the areas from which the Kansas Amish had migrated, the crop of choice in Reno County was winter wheat, a crop brought to Kansas by the Russian Mennonites, Anabaptist cousins of the Amish, when

they emigrated from Russia in the 1870s. The expanse of land necessary for wheat farming and the problems with traction that occurred with horse farming prompted the Kansas Amish to adopt use of tractors more readily than in mother settlements farther east.⁴⁵ This adoption of technology was common in the Kansas Amish settlements, perhaps because “their small numbers and isolation from other major areas of Amish settlement has increased their susceptibility to acculturative pressures.”⁴⁶ For whatever reasons, from their initial settlement in the Plains, the Kansas Amish were quick to adopt new technologies and customs that would not have been embraced by stricter *Ordnung* of older communities farther east.

Much as the maker of the Baskets quilt attempted to hide her adoption of a fancy technique, some Kansas Amish also tried to disguise their technological adaptations. Most Old Order Amish church districts rejected automobile ownership in the early twentieth century due to expense, the ability of cars to weaken family ties with increased mobility, and the general worldliness of automobiles.⁴⁷ At present, nearly all Old Order Amish continue to refrain from owning and driving cars. The Amish living in the Partridge district in Reno County, however, developed their own compromise to dealing with the automobile. After their required alternative service as conscientious objectors during the war, some young Amish men returned to their home community wanting to drive cars as they were permitted to in their urban alternative-service placements. While cars were clearly against the group’s *Ordnung*, some Amish men improvised and stripped down cars to look like utilitarian trucks that might serve a purpose on a farm. These cars, called “hoopies,” often had the backseat replaced by a box and sometimes had the doors torn off.⁴⁸ Like dark machine-appliqué stitches, the hoopie better suited Amish sensibilities than might a more obvious adaptation of worldly “English” practices. The hoopie, however, was relatively short-

lived. In 1958 the local Amish bishop finally decided against the ownership of automobiles, prompting those in favor of cars to split from the church, forming the Center Amish Mennonite Church.⁴⁹

PROPERTY 4: DESIGN

The designs and motifs used on Kansas Amish quilts also reflect the acculturation occurring in the Plains. In general, quilts made in midwestern Amish communities exhibit distinct ties to mainstream, or “English,” quilts of the same era. Midwestern Amish quilt-makers adapted the quiltmaking vernacular of mainstream American quiltmakers, who by the mid-nineteenth century were often using the repeating block format. The classic midwestern Amish interpretation of this style, often found in quilts made in the large Amish settlements in Ohio and Indiana, consists of repeated pieced blocks set diagonally, alternating with unpieced blocks. Often a narrow frame and a wider contrasting outer border surround this design field of blocks. All of the Kansas Amish quilts I studied retained the wide outer border of the classic style. The use of narrow frames varied, with four quilts having no inner frame and the remaining quilts having from one to three frames. Six quilts have the classic scheme of blocks set diagonally. All have a contrasting binding; only one has rounded corners.

The Amish who settled in the Great Plains faced many struggles, such as droughts, blizzards, and dust storms, alongside their “English” neighbors. Cultural exchange in many forms, including the sharing of quilt patterns, surely occurred over these decades of survival on the frontier. Amish living in Kansas were in fact somewhat quicker to adopt various “English” amenities not readily used in older settlements, including curtains and carpets.⁵⁰ Stylized baskets like those featured in two of the quilts would not have been among the accepted repertoire of early Amish quilt-makers, but would have been adopted from “English” patterns, whether viewed on the

clothesline or through a face-to-face mode of exchange.

From her interviews with Amish women, Granick learned that some Amish quiltmakers would use patterns published in magazines such as *Farmer's Guide* and *Farmer's Wife*, or those included in Mountain Mist quilt batting, just as many "English" quiltmakers of the first half of the twentieth century did.⁵¹ In fact, the block found on one of the examined quilts was published as the pattern "Ducks and Ducklings" in the *Farm Journal*.⁵² These farm periodicals catered not only to the men farmers but also to farmwives who made ready use of the published quilt patterns. Through periodicals, Amish women had access to the same patterns as "English" quiltmakers, without a formal means of exchange taking place.

Other patterns, including the Stars motif used in the quilt shown in Figure 4, were likely the result of innovative, experimental quiltmakers not bound by the strict standards that may have governed quiltmakers in less-isolated Amish communities. The unusual insertion of an obtuse triangle on each side of the tiny two-inch squares that form the center of each star make the stars appear fat. Star quilts of all sorts were popular among both Amish and "English" quiltmakers. The tan and blue Stars variation (Fig. 5) is another example of how a quiltmaker interpreted a typical star pattern. The inconsistent use of assorted shades of blue and tan fabric resulted in some blocks reading as typical stars, while others appear as crosses and still other blocks have too little contrast to even reveal the pieced pattern. Gertrude Miller also pieced star quilts, although her diary does not indicate her motivations or how she may have assembled this popular motif. Her February 18, 1927, diary entry simply reads: "was sun shine but cold put two quilts together. they were star quilts."⁵³

PROPERTY 6: FUNCTION

The small, infant-size quilts found in the Sara Miller Collection were made, as all Amish quilts were traditionally made, with the in-

tention of utility. Intricately pieced quilts are not the simplest means of providing bed coverings for a child, but a quilt melds utility and aesthetics in a distinct way. Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, Amish quilt authors Rachel and Kenneth Pellman describe the privacy surrounding Amish pregnancy in the early part of the twentieth century: "In many cases women shared their secret only with their husbands. . . . It was considered better to wait and see that everything would be without complications before collecting clothing and layette accessories. Thus crib quilts were made by mothers, grandmothers, aunts or other relatives after the baby arrived."⁵⁴ If this sentiment was true in a prosperous community in eastern Pennsylvania, it was likely amplified in small, isolated Amish settlements in the perilous Plains.

Rows of gravestones mark the premature deaths of infants and children at the Amish cemetery between Haven and Yoder (see Fig. 6). The reality of infant mortality may have indeed prompted mothers and grandmothers to refrain from creating quilts in celebration of an infant's arrival until it seemed certain that the child would live. One unsuccessful Amish settlement in western Kansas faced this sad truth twofold. Willie Wagler recounts that at the short-lived Amish settlement in Ford County, Kansas, seventeen children died from 1905 through 1917. Years of drought, in contrast to the promised rain advertised by land agents, forced the demise of the settlement.⁵⁵ The last Amish family left the settlement in 1922; many of the families moved east to Reno County. The graveyard full of children's headstones was not cared for after the Amish families had all left. So in 1939 a group of former Ford County residents and their friends and neighbors in Reno County disinterred the coffins of the seventeen children and moved and reburied them the following day at the Amish cemetery near Partridge. Seven of the children were unnamed infant sons and daughters of Amish families.⁵⁶ Perhaps the fact that these quilts even exist and were not worn to shreds by consecutive children in large Amish

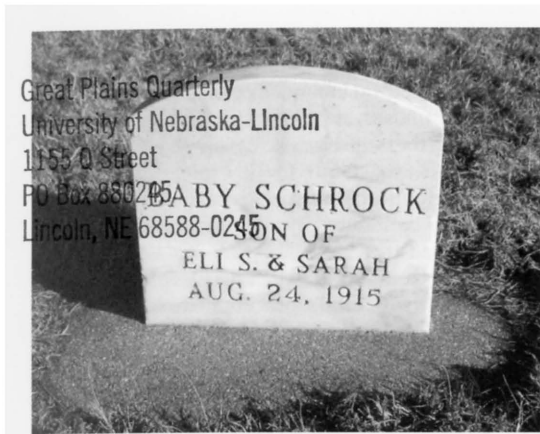


FIG. 6. Gravestone at the Amish cemetery between Yoder and Haven Kansas. This grave marks the death of one of the many Amish children who died in the Great Plains. Photograph by author.

families attests to their limited use due to the uncertain nature of childhood in this time and place.

An additional function of these quilts was much less utilitarian. As highlighted by Gertrude Miller's diary, quilting brought together friends and family for a common purpose that allowed for social interaction.⁵⁷ On March 15, 1927, she wrote, "we had a quilting" and proceeded to list the attendees, using the man's first name to identify the woman—the usual practice in Amish communities with many similar names: "Jake Sarah, Ola Coblentz, Mattie, Noah Mary, Harvey Mary, Joe Polly, Yost Mary."⁵⁸ These quilts connected not only individuals within the local community but quiltmakers with their mother settlements by using familiar materials and techniques. This function of creating *Gemeinde* may have been just as important as the more obvious function of providing bed covering to a child.

CONCLUSION

Are these anonymous, dateless quilts culturally significant? The stories they can tell are limited by their lack of documentation.

Other quilts, laboriously stitched with names and dates, might give us more information about the lives of specific quiltmakers. But equally important are quiet quilts such as those in the Sara Miller Collection, made by quiltmakers pursuing a simple, yet challenging existence in small towns such as Haven, Kansas. The experiences of the Old Order Amish living in the Great Plains are not entirely unique. They, like other Amish, struggle to lead lives void of the temptations modern society offers, while living lives obedient to their interpretation of God's will. The Kansas Amish, like their "English" counterparts, sought land, freedom, and adventure in the Great Plains. A simple, crib-size patchwork quilt is unable to speak loudly and distinctly of these adventures. Yet these small quilts, viewed within the context of the culture, time, and geographic region in which they were made, can elucidate aspects of this little-studied group of Amish who ventured away from the major settlements and attempted life in the Great Plains. Without a careful examination of the quilts themselves, as well as the history and experiences of these people, we could generically refer to both the people and the quilts simply as "Amish." A closer look reveals that this community and these quilts, while no doubt Amish, are also shaped by their existence in the Great Plains and thus are uniquely "Kansas Amish."

NOTES

1. Rarely are quilts from this region specifically addressed in research on Amish quilts. In *The Amish Quilt* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1989), Eve Wheatcroft Granick gives an overview of the quilting styles of various geographic regions but surmises that little distinguishes these quilts from those made in "mother" communities elsewhere in the Midwest. Other authors, including the Museum of American Folk Art's Elizabeth V. Warren, also lump midwestern communities together. See Warren, "Amish Quilts in the Museum of American Folk Art," *Folk Art: The Magazine of the Museum of American Folk Art*, v. 24 (Summer 1999): 23-24. The plates in Donald B. Kraybill, Patricia T. Herr, and Jonathan Holstein's *A Quiet Spirit: Amish Quilts from the Collection of Cindy Tietze*

and Stuart Hodosh (Los Angeles: UCLA Museum of Cultural History, 1996), are separated into three categories: Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Other Regions. Perhaps there are few distinguishing visual characteristics that separate Kansas quilts from those made elsewhere in the Midwest, but that does not eliminate the existence of distinct motivations, symbolic meanings, or cultural significance. For other regional studies of Amish quilts, see Ricky Clark's examination of Ohio Amish quilts, "Germanic Aesthetics, Germanic Communities," in *Quilts in Community: Ohio's Traditions*, ed. Ricky Clark, 20-45 (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1991); Patricia T. Herr's studies of Amish quilts of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in *Quilting Traditions: Pieces from the Past* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2000) and "Quilts within the Amish Culture," in Kraybill, Herr, and Holstein, *A Quiet Spirit*, 45-67; and David Pottenger, *Quilts from the Indiana Amish: A Regional Collection* (New York: Dutton, 1983).

2. Steven M. Nolt, *A History of the Amish* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1992), 9-10. For additional historical and cultural background on the Old Order Amish, see Theron Schlabach, *Peace, Faith, Nation: Mennonites and Amish in Nineteenth-Century America*, *The Mennonite Experience in America*, vol. 2 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988); Donald B. Kraybill and Marc A. Olshan, eds., *The Amish Struggle with Modernity* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994); John A. Hostetler, *Amish Society*, 4th ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Donald B. Kraybill, *The Riddle of Amish Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); and David Luthy, *The Amish in America: Settlements that Failed, 1840-1960* (Aylmer, ON, and Lagrange, IN: Pathway Publishers, 1986).

3. David Wagler, "History and Change of the Amish of Reno County, Kansas" (unpublished paper, Bethel College, North Newton, KS, 1968), 6-7.

4. D. Paul Miller, "Amish Acculturation" (master's thesis, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1950), 26; Wagler, "History and Change," 7.

5. Wagler, "History and Change," 7.

6. *Ibid.*, 8.

7. *Ibid.*, 10.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 21, 23.

10. Miller, 59.

11. *Ibid.*, 57-58.

12. *Ibid.*, 59.

13. *Ibid.*, 60.

14. Nolt, *A History of the Amish*, 140.

15. Granick, *Amish Quilt*, 25; Herr, "Quilts within the Amish Culture," 46.

16. Hostetler, *Amish Society*, 22.

17. Schlabach, *Peace, Faith, Nation*, 218.

18. Granick, *Amish Quilt*, 31.

19. Barbara Brackman, "Rocky Road to Kansas," in *Kansas Quilts and Quilters*, 54-55 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993).

20. The Kansas State Quilt Project conducted a survey of the quilts existing in the state. All fifty states have conducted similar surveys. Brackman, "Rocky Road to Kansas," 21-22.

21. Sara Reimer Farley, "The Developing Mennonite Quilting Tradition: A History of Culture and Faith," in *Kansas Quilts and Quilters*, 135.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Gertrude Miller diary, February-March 1927, private collection of Marilyn Lehman, Austin, TX. I became acquainted with Lehman after she gave a presentation about the diaries at the Mennonite/Writing Conference, October 2002, Goshen College, Goshen, IN.

24. Kenneth L. Ames, "The Stuff of Everyday Life: American Decorative Arts and Household Furnishings," in *Material Culture*, ed. Thomas J. Schlereth, 104 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985).

25. E. McClung Fleming, "Artifact Study: A Proposed Model," *Winterthur Portfolio* 9 (1974): 156.

26. Linda Welters and Margaret Ordoñez, "Early Calico Printing in Rhode Island," in *Uncoverings 2001* (Lincoln, NE: American Quilt Study Group, 2001), 65-86.

27. The International Quilt Study Center acquired the Sara Miller Collection in 2000 as a generous gift from Robert and Ardis James. Miller, who spent much of her life as a member of the Old Order Amish, purchased the quilts from a dealer who bought the quilts directly from Amish and formerly Amish families throughout the Midwest. Unfortunately, most information about specific quilts that the dealer may have gleaned from the families, such as maker and date, did not accompany the quilts to Miller or to the IQSC. However, the dealer often indicated where he acquired specific quilts. The quilts studied here were all acquired in Kansas. The IQSC practices a conservative assigning of attribution, using the terms "probably" and "possibly" to indicate geographic origin if definitive provenance is not solidly documented. Although these quilts were acquired in Kansas, the IQSC cannot say with certainty that they were made there due to the practice of frequent migration within the Amish community.

28. I modified the Fleming Model to accommodate the examination of multiple artifacts in one study. Rather than following the very linear, systematic model Fleming promotes, this entailed a more free-flowing examination of the quilts, with

some quilts serving as clear candidates for discussion of a specific property.

29. I visited this cemetery in November and December 2002 and was struck by the rows of graves marking the deaths of infants and children. The names Bontrager, Miller, Yoder, and Schrock appeared with high frequency.

30. See Luthy, *Amish in America*.

31. Hostetler, *Amish Society*, 166.

32. Granick, *Amish Quilt*, 156.

33. Janneken Smucker, *Amish Crib Quilts from the Midwest: The Sara Miller Collection* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003), 58.

34. Gideon L. Fisher, "An Early Move to Kansas," in Luthy, *Amish in America*, 133.

35. Brackman, "Rocky Road to Kansas," 17.

36. Appendix to *Kansas Quilts and Quilters*, 192.

37. Granick, *Amish Quilt*, 144, 145.

38. *Ibid.*, 60.

39. *Ibid.*, 61.

40. Judy Shroeder Tomlinson, *Mennonite Quilts and Pieces* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1985), 8; Granick, *Amish Quilt*, 143.

41. Hostetler, *Amish Society*, 236.

42. Granick, *Amish Quilt*, 128.

43. Eve Wheatcroft Granick, "Amish Quilts: Icons of Faith," in *Amish Quilts 1880 to 1940 from the Collection of Faith and Stephen Brown*, 13 (Ann

Arbor: University of Michigan Museum of Art, 2000).

44. Kraybill, *Riddle of Amish Culture*, 34.

45. James A. Knight, "Pluralism, Boundary Maintenance, and Cultural Persistence among the Amish" (master's thesis, Wichita State University, 1977), 90.

46. *Ibid.*, 94.

47. Nolt, *History of the Amish*, 216.

48. Wagler, "History and Change," 25.

49. *Ibid.*, 28.

50. *Ibid.*, 14.

51. Granick, *Amish Quilt*, 173.

52. Barbara Brackman, *Encyclopedia of Pieced Quilt Patterns* (Paducah, KY: American Quilter's Society, 1993), 304-5. Brackman does not indicate the date this pattern was published in *Farm Journal*.

53. Miller diary, February 18, 1927.

54. Rachel and Kenneth Pellman, *Amish Crib Quilts* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1985), 10.

55. Luthy, *Amish in America*, 143-44.

56. Willie Wagler, "Moving the Cemetery," in *Amish Roots: A Treasury of Amish History, Wisdom, and Lore*, ed. John A. Hostetler, 54-55 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

57. Miller diary, February-March 1927; Hostetler, *Amish Society*, 167.

58. Miller diary, March 15, 1927.

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