

Seeing quilts and coverlets up close

For a dazzling display and close-up look at the bedcoverings featured on the previous pages and more, visit the newest museum exhibit at the State Historical Society of Iowa—"Heartland Comfort." The exhibit is in the Iowa Historical Building, 600 East Locust, Des Moines, Iowa 50319. Phone 515-281-6412. Exhibits are open Tuesday-Saturday, 9-4:30,

and Sundays, 12-4:30. Closed on state holidays. (During June through August, the museum is also open Mondays, 9-4:30.) "Heartland Comfort" will close in May 2000.

The exhibit was curated by Michael O. Smith, designed by Jennie Morgan, and fabricated by Tom Hardie, Jon Robison, and Vern Tyler.

Caring for quilts and coverlets

❖ Old quilts have a warmth and charm that cannot be found in many other antiques and accessory items. This has contributed to their present popularity as decorative pieces for the home. Consideration should be given to sharp edges over which the weight of the quilt may be draped. If the quilt is to be hung against a wall, a "sleeve" of fabric should be basted to the back of the quilt, through which a rod can be inserted.

❖ Remember that humid conditions promote mold and mildew growth and that extreme lack of humidity will cause the fibers of the fabric to dry out, becoming brittle and easily damaged.

❖ Even though quilts may look brilliant when drenched with light, exposure of fabrics to direct sunlight is one of the most common causes of damage to quilts. The invisible ultraviolet rays of sunlight are the most harmful. Never place quilts in direct sunlight; light exposure is cumulative and irreversible. Florescent lights also give off UV light.

❖ Store quilts properly. Strive for low light exposure and good air circulation. Unfinished wood and regular cardboard turn acidic with age and harm textile fibers that are in direct contact. Neither cedar chests nor blanket chests are good storage containers for quilts. Plastics give off harmful vapors and allow moisture to build up, which may lead to mildew. Excessive weight on folds in the quilt cause the fibers to break. Good alternatives are to wrap quilts in acid-free tissue paper and clean white sheets before placing on shelves or in acid-free cardboard boxes. Pad folds with crumpled acid-free tissue paper. Acid-free tissue is recommended for cotton quilts only, not silk or wool ones. Inspect and refold quilts every year, using a different folding pattern to avoid permanent creases. An excellent alternative is to layer quilts on an unused bed in a darkened room; place white sheets between them to prevent dye migration.

❖ Vacuuming should always be the first cleaning method. Accept some stains and imperfections as part of the quilt's history. Be cautious about dry cleaning or wet cleaning old quilts.

Keeping their stories alive

Too often, the stories behind an object are lost when the object changes hands. Take the time now to record the following information about your quilts and coverlets.

❖ Quilt owner (name, address, and phone; relationship of quilt owner to quilt maker; how the quilt was obtained).

❖ Quilt maker (name, address, and phone; birth and death dates; occupation; religion; major residence for most of life; number and names of children; spouse's name and occupation; parents' names, places of birth, ethnicity or race).

❖ How did the quilt maker learn to make quilts and when? Why does/did the quilt maker quilt? Did the quilt maker

make other quilts? How many and when? Other information?

❖ Where and when was the quilt made? For what occasion, person, and use was the quilt made?

❖ Describe the quilt (pattern, size, color, fabric, name and source of the quilt pattern, etc.). Who did the quilting or tying? When? Other significant information?

❖ Once gathered, date and sign the information. Don't store it next to a quilt; paper and ink can damage fabrics.

(The basis of the care and documentation guidelines above are materials created by the Iowa Quilt Research Project in 1989-1990.—The Editor)