

Quilts Reveal Lives of Early Iowans

by Steven Blaski

Imagine you're making a quilt. You've designed it to commemorate an important event in your life. Composing your quilt, you use cherished remnants — fabric from a wedding dress, perhaps, or from a shirt that belonged to a friend who has died. You devote many hours of care and patience stitching it together. And when it's finished you sleep with it. What handmade item is more personal?

Because they so intimately reflect the lives and times of the people who make them, quilts are rich sources of historical information. This will be illustrated in *The Thread That Remains: Patterns from Iowa's Past*, an exhibit opening May 13 at the State Historical Building in Des Moines. The exhibit will contain sixty-three quilts made in or brought to Iowa before 1925 — and thus will shed light on the public and private lives of early Iowans.

The Thread That Remains is a collaboration between the State Historical Society of Iowa's Museum Bureau and the Iowa Quilts Research Project. According to chairperson Katheryn Russi, the project was established in 1987 to register and photograph pre-1925 quilts, teach how to properly care for them, and create an exhibit of outstanding quilts for the public to view.

To accomplish this, the project sponsored twenty-eight "quilt days" in towns across the state. Iowans brought in more than 2,500 quilts to be registered, Russi says. This entailed documenting everything known about each quilt — its size, patterns, materials, condition, and history. The project will donate these documents to the State Historical Society so that future researchers will have easy access to the information.

"Quilts are like family records," Russi says. "We wanted to make Iowans more aware of the historical value of quilts so that future generations can appreciate and learn

from them."

After registering and photographing the quilts, a project committee and the Society's Michael O. Smith, curator of the exhibit, selected a theme to determine which of the registered quilts to display. "The theme is about how quilts are signposts, markers of important life passages — like births, birthdays, weddings, mourning, and community events," Smith says.

Included in the exhibit are both pieced and appliquéd quilts. All were made before 1925. The oldest ones date from the early 1800s, Russi says. The exhibit, on display through September 2, will include photos of some of the quilt makers, plus related artifacts from the Society's collections.

In addition, the following events will be held in the State Historical Building this summer:

- **June 9, 9 AM** Sara J. Kadolph
"Conservation Practices for Historic Quilts"
- **June 9, 10:30 AM** Shirley McElderry
"T.L.C. for Antique Quilts and Textiles"
(Note: Registration is required for June 9 workshops, as part of the Congress of Historical Organizations (COHO). For more information on COHO, see back page.)
- **June 10, 1-4 PM** Quilt Identification Day
- **June 23, 1:30 PM** Liz Porter, Marianne Fons
"Never Underestimate the Power of the Nine Patch"
- **July 28, 10 AM** Barbara Brackman
"Quilts as Vehicles for Social, Political, Religious, and Self Expression"
- **July 28, 1:30 PM** Barbara Brackman
"Patchwork Souvenirs: Quilts from the 1933 Chicago World's Fair"
- **August 18, 1:30 PM** Cuesta Benberry
"Afro-American and Slave-Made Quilts"
- **August 18, 9-1:30, 3-4 PM**
Quilt Identification Day