

Victorian Crazy Quilts

by Carole A. Spencer

DURING the last two decades of the nineteenth century, a new type of needlework emerged in the form of the crazy quilt. Its origin is unknown, as is the source of its name. Some surmise that crazy quilting may have been

inspired by the asymmetry and juxtaposition of color and texture in Oriental artwork, viewed by the public through the Japanese exhibit at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. Some suggest that the term "crazy" might be explained by the fact that making crazy quilts did indeed become a "craze." Others note that the irregularly shaped pieces create a cracked or "crazed" look, like the hair-line cracks of a ceramic glaze.

Victorians adored the crazy quilt for its jewel-toned colors and lavish ornamentation. Scraps of rich fabrics — silks, satins, velvets, laces, and brocades — were carefully selected and purchased. Pieces of ribbons, sewing scraps, and men's ties were also used. American flags, political campaign ribbons, Civil War memorial ribbons, and other souvenirs were sometimes sewn into the patchwork as well. Each piece was basted to a foundation fabric in a typical random pattern.

The quilts on the following pages, from the Des Moines museum collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa, represent the rich variety of Victorian crazy quilts in design and ornamentation. About half of these quilts were made in totally random patterns. Others are composed of equal-sized squares made up of random pieces. Although a few follow a pattern, the fabric choices and ornate stitching are typical of Victorian crazy quilts.

Once basted in place, the edges of the pieces

Right: Reflecting the Victorians' love of color, the crazy quilt was as likely to be found in a parlor as in a bedroom. In such an elegant setting it might be used as a piano cover or be draped over a couch, as it appears here in the reception room of Terrace Hill, the Governor's Mansion in Des Moines. Left: 1883 advertisement.



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were adorned with elaborate embroidery stitches such as the feather, herringbone, or chain stitch. The pieces were then lavishly decorated with fancywork in silk or metallic thread, fine ribbon, and beads. Fabric paintings, chenille work (made with a pile yarn), and appliqués were also favorite choices. Popular magazines such as *Godey's Lady's Book* advised readers that the more ornamentation and "the greater the diversity in stitches the better." The finished work was often bordered with a velvet band, scalloped edging, metallic braiding, or other ornamentation.

Pre-stamped fabric pieces and silk thread were available in do-it-yourself kits, and remnants of silk and ribbons could be ordered through the mail. Fancywork patterns were either drawn by the quilt maker or obtained from fabric or thread companies such as the Brainerd and Armstrong Silk Company in New London, Connecticut, or the E. M. Lemarie Company in Little Ferry, New Jersey. Patterns were also provided in women's magazines such as *Godey's Lady's Book*, *Peterson's Magazine*, *Harper's Bazar*, and *Delineator*. Popular needlework patterns for crazy quilts included birds (owls and peacocks were used most often), wild and domestic animals, butterflies, bugs, spiders, and spider webs. Japanese folding fans were also common motifs, as were Kate Greenaway figures, inspired by the English illustrator of children's books.

Flowers often adorn the Victorian crazy quilt. The sunflower, iris, cattail, and lily were fashionable choices of the 1880s. Some flowers, especially the rose, were made in three-dimensional form. By combining certain kinds of flowers, the quilt maker could convey a message through the Victorian symbolism ascribed to flowers. For example, the red rose symbolized love; the yellow rose, jealousy; and the weeping willow, mourning.

Like the album quilt, crazy quilts were often made as commemorative gifts for friends, family, and public figures (especially highly regarded men). Women often made crazy quilts as personal gifts for fiancés and husbands, and groups often made them for their ministers. A block-style crazy quilt that lacks a central theme often indicates this kind of group effort, in which the blocks were made sepa-

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Above: Common ad in women's magazines. Right: This quilt, attributed to Emily Packard in 1888, is a virtual catalog of crazy-quilt motifs, from butterflies to American flags. Note also the embroidered comet in the upper left corner, and, in the bottom square, an embroidered penknife, spider web, insect, anchor, and fish. The musical staff may be based on a design published in *Ornamental Stitches for Embroidery* by T. E. Parker (1885).

Elsewhere, the quilt proudly proclaims in embroidery that it contains 780 pieces. Each block, separated by a velvet band, has different embroidered initials, and there is some variance in the embroidery technique. The blocks may have been made by other women and assembled by Emily Packard.

(Silk, velvet, cotton, and felt; 1888, 82¼" x 58½")

rately by individual women and then combined into a quilt. These quilts were embroidered with names, dates, biographical information about the person or family, poems, and perhaps the outline of a hand. The museum





recently acquired a presentation crazy quilt made in the sampler block style. In 1890 the Ladies Aid of the Evangelical Lutheran Bethanian Congregation of Burlington, Iowa, presented the quilt to their pastor, the Reverend Paul Bieger. The elaborate quilt is inscribed in German, bordered in velvet, and edged in metallic cording with corner tassels.

Crazy quilts were not typically used in the bedroom but rather in the parlor or music room, where they could be displayed. Small quilts, often thought to be children's quilts, were actually made to be used as table covers, antimacassars, and piano covers, or to drape over a sofa or cover a footstool.

Although crazy quilts occupied only a brief period in the history of quilting, some consider them most significant as representations of women's "silent rebellion" against the restrictions of Victorian society. Because of the Industrial Revolution, many changes had taken place in the lives of middle- and upper-class women. Women's roles had changed from producer of goods to that of consumers and moral protectors, and to engage in fancy needlework symbolized their leisured status and reflected favorably on their husbands. Although Victorian women were governed by strict behavioral codes and limited both economically and politically, they were able to demonstrate some control through the domestic arts. Frances Lichten, in *Hearts and Hands*, suggests that crazy quilts were "restless textiles" and "protests against the shackles of needlework discipline" imposed upon women to display their leisured status.

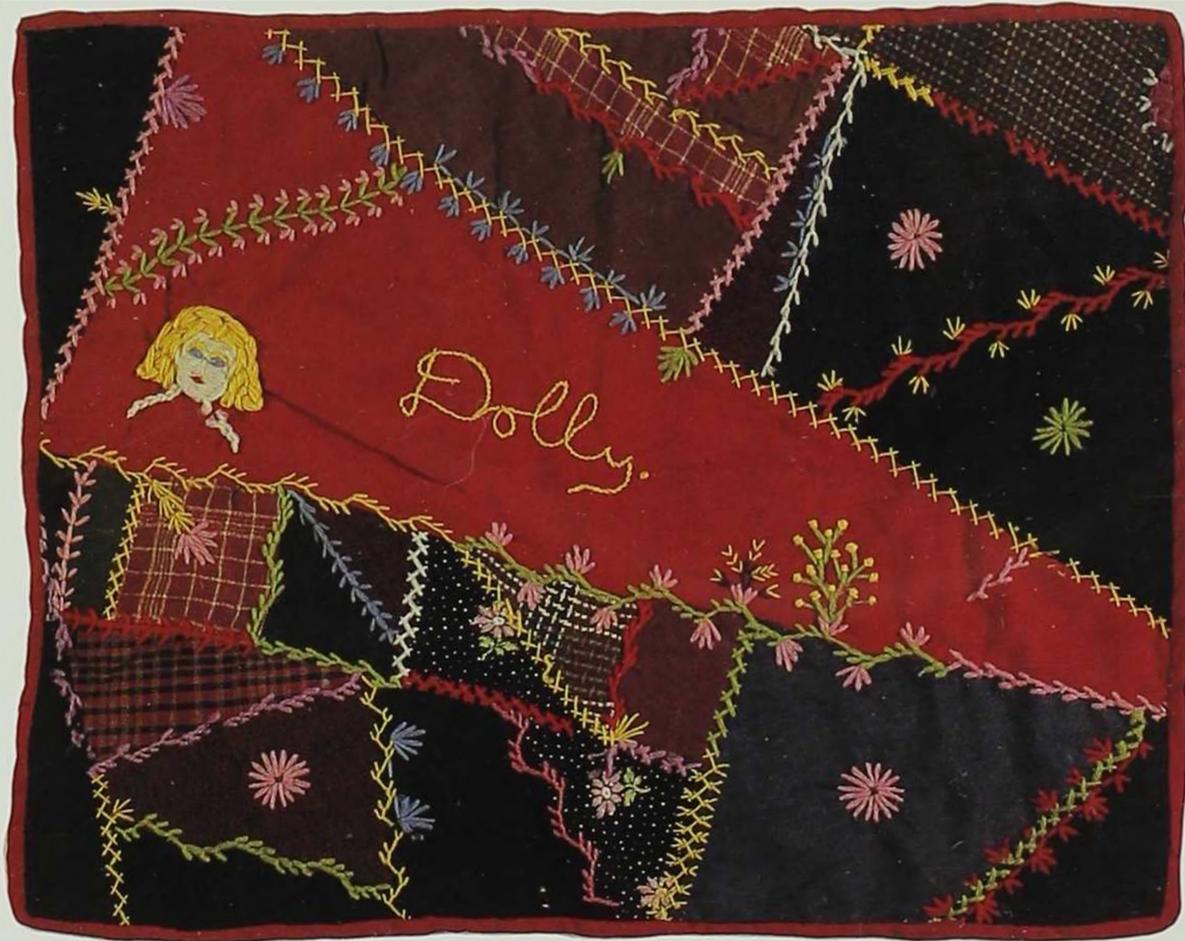
As the fad neared its end, crazy quilts were no longer made as decorative pieces but for functional purposes. Cotton thread and wool yarn replaced the silk and metallic thread. The quantity and quality of needlework lessened, and larger pieces of pastel cottons and wools replaced small pieces of jewel-toned fabrics.

While the popularity of crazy-quilt needlework lasted for a relatively short time, crazy quilts continue to be valued today for their beautiful combinations of vivid colors, rich fabrics, and intricate ornamentation. Furthermore, the crazy quilt serves to document changes taking place in women's lives during the nineteenth century.



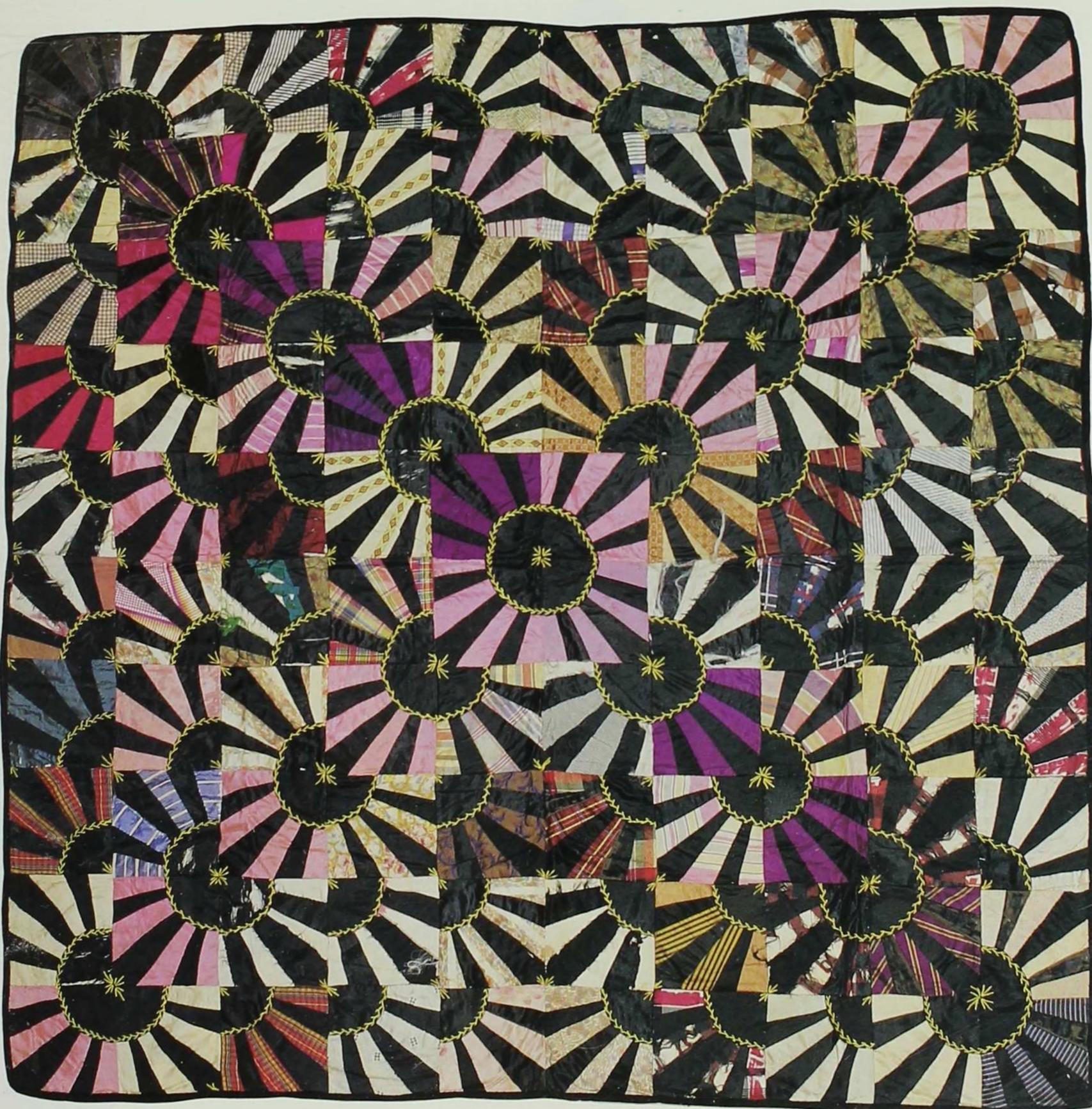
Opposite: This small quilt or "throw" is not precisely a crazy quilt because of the material used and the method of construction. Along with the craze for "crazy patchwork" in the nineteenth century was the practice of constructing quilts of other "found" materials. One popular material was silk badges. The majority of badges used in this quilt are Knight Templar badges; others include an 1896 Wisconsin State Fair badge, an IOOF badge, and an 1887 badge honoring E. R. Clapp on the fiftieth anniversary of settlement in Iowa.

Above: On reverse side of the "badge" quilt, the central piece is a man's silk handkerchief. (Silk; 1895-1905; 44½" x 29")



Above: Crazy piecework was used for many different items, including doll furnishings often made by little girls. This quilt was probably not made by a child because the embroidery is fairly sophisticated.
(Wool and cotton; 1900–1920; 20½" x 16½")





Above: Made by Laura Henegan of Ottumwa, Iowa, this small quilt or "throw" was probably intended for use on a couch in the parlor. According to family tradition, the quilt and a companion throw were made from remnants of silk neckties. (Silk; 1900–1920; 49" x 48")

Lower left: Thought for many years to be a doll quilt, this small quilt was probably a small throw or pillow cover originally. The embroidered "E" indicates this probably was made by Emily Burch of Baxter, Iowa, after her marriage to Dr. H. W. Canfield in 1903. (Silk; after 1902; 26" x 24³/₄")



Three details from an 1894 quilt, composed of squares made by various Iowa chapters of the Women's Relief Corps. W.R.C. was the women's auxiliary of the Grand Army of the Republic, the Civil War veterans group. The quilt is attributed to the Aunt Becky Young Tent 6.



Far left: The American flag square is from a W.R.C. chapter in Afton, Iowa. Note the three-dimensional flowers around it. Far right: One square incorporates a silk meeting badge from Missouri Valley, Iowa. (Silk, wool, and cotton; 1894; 74¼" x 71")

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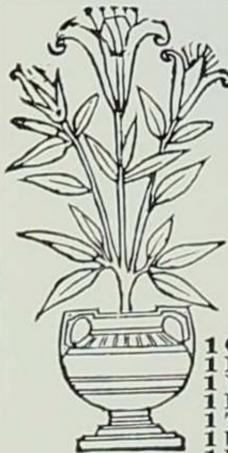
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| 1 bunch of Fuschias. | 1 Crying Baby for Tidy, in Outline, 10 in. | 1 strip of Scallops for Skirts, Infant's Blanket, &c. |
| 1 bunch of Strawberries | 1 Alphabet, 1 1/2 in. high, with Sprig of Ferns | 1 sprig Daisies and Buds. |
| 1 vine of Forget-me-nots and Daisies | 1 outline design, for Lambrequins, &c., 6 in. high. | 1 new vine of Roses, 2 inches wide |
| 1 single Daisy and Forget-me-not, 2x2 in. | 1 Braiding Pattern, wide | 2 Braiding Patterns, narrow design |
| 1 boquet of Daisies and Forget-me-nots, 5x6 inches | 1 boquet Daisies and buds | 1 little Butterfly with closed wings |
| 1 sprig of Bachelor's Button, 3 1/2 in. high | 1 spray Lilies of the Valley, 3 1/2 in. | 1 new scallop with Forget-me-nots |
| 1 Scallop with sprigs of Lily of the Valley | 1 spray of Autumn Leaves | 1 vine of Roses and Buds, 5 inches |
| 1 vine of Daisies and Ferns, 5 1/2 inches wide | 1 vine of Leaves, 1 1/2 in. wide | 1 Butterfly on spray of Rosebuds |
| 1 growing design of Violets, for Lambrequins, &c., 6 in. high. | 2 sprigs Bachelor's Button | 1 Butterfly with wide open wings |
| 1 sprig of Daisies, 4 in. high | 1 plain scallop for Flannel Skirts | 1 bunch of Forget-me-nots, 4 1/2 in. |
| 1 sprig of Barberries, 3 in. high | 1 Boy holding Sunflower, 7 in. | 8 or 10 Crazy Patchwork designs |
| 1 single Rose and Bud, 2x2 in. | 1 Boy and Girl for Tidy, 7x6 in. | |
| 1 vine with Scallop, 2 1/2 in. wide | | |
| 1 design, Two Owls on branch | | |
| 1 sprig of Golden Rod, 4 in. high | | |
| 1 bunch of Roses and Buds, 3x5 in. | | |
| 1 cluster of Strawberries, 2 1/2 x 3 in. | | |
| 1 sprig of Forget-me-nots, 1 1/2 x 2 in. | | |
| 1 Peacock Feather | | |
| 1 Cat | 1 Kitten, 3 1/2 in. high | 1 Wide Braiding Pattern for Tinsel |
| 1 Fish | 1 Full-blown Daisies | 1 large Butterfly |
| 1 Daisy | 1 little Girl, 5 in. high | 1 Spray of Leaves |
| 2 Stars | 1 large bunch Daisies | 1 Spray of Daisies, 4x5 in. |
| 1 Pansy | 1 Bachelor's Button | 1 Full-blown Rose |
| 1 Arrow | 1 large bunch Pansies | 2 small Butterflies |
| 8 Sparrows | 1 Wild Rose and Buds | 1 Star and Anchor |
| 1 Buttercup | 1 Vine of Flowers, 8 in. | 1 Hen and Chickens |
| 1 Tulip, 5 in. | 1 Bird on Branch, 4 in. | 1 Spray Jessamine |
| 1 little Bird | 1 Half Moon with Face | 1 Sprig Buttercups |
| 1 Sprig Pink | 1 branch of Roses, 9 in. | 1 Hand holding Hat |
| 1 Golden Rod | 1 large spray of Wheat | 1 Pretty Girl's Face |
| 1 sprig Violets | 3 Sprigs Forget-me-not | 5 Snowflake designs |
| | | 1 Odd Fellow design |

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This quilt was probably used on a child's bed. The scalloped border runs on three sides. The quilt descended through the Redhead family of Des Moines. (Silk and velvet; 1880–1900; 57" x 52½"). Left: typical ads from 1880s-90s women's magazines.



The year after Lydia E. Henderson of Greene County, Iowa, married Samuel E. Shaw, she made an elaborate crazy quilt, details of which appear on this page. The quilt incorporates most of the popular embroidery patterns for crazy quilts in the 1880s. Note, for example, the hummingbirds, swan, and flowers.

Opposite: Lydia Henderson Shaw's quilt graces a couch in the reception room at Terrace Hill. Shaw may well have intended her quilt to be displayed in an elegant parlor rather than to be used in a bedroom as extra bedding.

(Silk and velvet; 1884; 65 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 57 $\frac{1}{2}$ ")







This presentation quilt was made by the Ladies Aid of the Evangelical Lutheran Bethanian Congregation, Burlington, Iowa. In 1890 they presented it to their pastor, Paul Bieger. Each square was created by an individual; the squares were then joined and quilted by the group. Note the six signature squares on the top and bottom panels.



Details of presentation quilt: Two center panels are embroidered in German text. The name "Louise" is embroidered by one of the fans beside the text. The presentation quilt features several typical crazy-quilt motifs, including an American flag, anchor, fans, and flowers (both painted and embroidered). There are also Trinity circles and a Star of David. (Silk, velvet, and cotton; 1890; 75½" x 64⅝")





Though made in the style of crazy patchwork, this quilt is much more practical than those made of silks and velvets and embroidered designs. The use of wool and large scrap pieces and the lack of fancy embroidery stitches place its construction towards the end of the era of crazy quilts.

(Wool and cotton; 1900–1920; 73 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 67 $\frac{1}{2}$ ")

NOTE ON SOURCES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Major secondary sources used were the following: Pat Ferrero, *Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women and Quilts on American Society* (1987); Sandi Fox, *Small Endearments: Nineteenth Century Quilts for Children* (1985); Rosemary Connolly Gately, "Crazy Quilts in the Collection of the Maryland Historical Society," *The Magazine Antiques* (Sept. 1988), pp. 558-73; Jonathan Holstein, *The Pieced Quilt: An American Design Tradition* (1973); Sue Barker McCarter, *North Carolina Quilts* (1988); Penny McMorris, *Crazy Quilts* (1984); and Pamela Tubby, *Patchwork and Applique* (1977).

The advertisements illustrating this article are from the Mary Barton Research Collection, SHSI (Des Moines).

The Palimpsest thanks the following individuals for their assistance in producing this article: SHSI chief curator Michael Smith, for help in photographing the collection and providing caption information; Chuck Greiner of Front Porch Studio, for photographing the quilts; and especially the Terrace Hill Commission and Barb Filer (administrator) and Pat Arnold (tour and volunteer coordinator) for allowing us to photograph the E. L. Shaw quilt in the reception room of Terrace Hill.

—The Editor