

Marie Webster

The 20th Century's First Trendsetting Quilt Designer

By Merikay Waldvogel

Published in *Vintage Quilts*, Spring 2001 issue.

She didn't make her way across the plains in a covered wagon. She didn't discover a cure for a dreaded disease, but she is nonetheless a pioneer to the quilting world. She is Marie Webster.

Marie was born on July 19, 1859, in Wabash, Indiana, to Josiah and Minerva Daugherty, and married George Webster Jr. on Valentine's Day 1884. Marie's talent for fine hand sewing, learned from her seamstress mother, was a favorite pastime through her childhood and adult years. But it wasn't until Marie was in her 50s that she began designing quilts, and thus changed the face of quilting as we know it today.

Inspired by the art nouveau style that was sweeping the decorative arts at the time, Marie designed her beautiful appliquéd quilts with pastel colors, curvilinear designs, and an abundance of floral themes, quite a departure from the pieced quilts of her ancestors. Needless to say, her designs were a breath of fresh air for quilting.



Her friends encouraged her to send a quilt to the Philadelphia home office of *Ladies' Home Journal*, whose editor, Edward Bok, was eager to showcase trend-setting designs for home decorating. That quilt, Pink Rose, along with three others—Iris, Snowflake, and Wind-blown Tulip—appeared in the January 1911 issue. A year later in the January 1912 issue, Poppy, Morning Glory, White Dogwood, and Sunflower were featured. The August 1912 issue featured six of Marie's baby quilts—Pansies and Butterflies, Sunbonnet Lassies (also known as Keepsake), Daisies, Wild Rose, Morning Glory Wreath, and Bedtime. A total of fourteen quilts were featured in less than two years—in color, no less! The quilting revival had begun.

Requests for Marie's quilt patterns poured into her Marion, Indiana, home, and she suddenly found herself in the mail-order business. She published a four-page pattern catalog entitled "The New Patch-work Patterns" and enlisted her family and friends to produce the pattern packages.

With interest in her quilt designs rising, Doubleday, Page & Co. hired her to write a book on the history of quilting and pattern names. She researched the topics as best she could and produced *Quilts, Their Story and How to Make Them*, which was published in October 1915, making it the first book ever published on American quilting. It was reprinted in 1916, 1926, 1928, 1929, 1943, and 1948, and could still be found in public libraries in the early 70s.

Between the magazine articles, her pattern company, and her book, Marie became a celebrity of sorts. She gave quilt lectures, signed books, and loaned her quilts for displays at big-city

department stores. But even with the added commitments to her schedule, Marie added to her portfolio of appliquéd designs. Those produced from 1914 to 1918 became her most popular—Grapes and Vines, Wreath of Roses, French Baskets, Poinsettia, and Cherokee Rose.

By 1921, the business had an official name—The Practical Patchwork Company. Marie's sister, Emma, worked on the patterns, as did friends Ida Hess and Evangeline Beshore. Together they packaged up patterns, instruction sheets, and fabric swatches, and then shipped them out.

The Practical Patchwork Company also sold partially completed quilts. For example, the French Baskets quilt was sold as a top—stamped for \$12, basted for \$45, and finished for \$95. Customers were given a choice of five pastel colors for the foundation fabric behind the basket appliquéd designs.

By the 1930s, Marie had slowed down a bit, and George died in 1938. She created no new designs, but her friends and associates kept the business going. In 1942, Marie moved to Princeton, New Jersey, with her only child, Lawrence, and his family. She died there in 1956 at the age of 97.

Her death, however, did not signal the end of her influence. As a new generation of quilt enthusiasts making their own appliquéd quilts discovered Marie Webster's designs, interest in her life and work was revived.

Rosalind Perry, Marie's granddaughter, met quilt historian Pat Nickols, of Rancho Santa Fe, California at a lecture in 1988. Pat described how important Rosalind's grandmother was to America's quilt story and strongly urged Rosalind to reprint



Marie's book.

To Rosalind, Marie Webster was a sweet, loving grandmother who lived with her family during Rosalind's childhood in New Jersey. Marie made Bunny with Basket appliquéd quilts for Rosalind and her sister, Kathy. Rosalind remembers her grandmother giving her an autographed copy of the first edition of her book on her tenth birthday. "At the time I was only dimly aware that she had actually written the book herself and had also designed and made the flowered quilts which adorned every bed in our house."

In 1990, Rosalind Perry published a new edition of her grandmother's quilt book with the complete original text and illustrations. She added a biography, notes, index, and twenty-two new color photographs of quilts. Since then Rosalind has teamed up with pattern designer Marty Frolli to publish two Marie Webster pattern books: *A Joy Forever* (1992) and *Marie Webster's Garden of Quilts* (available in Spring 2001).

In 1991, Marie Webster was inducted into the Quilters Hall of Fame. Her Marion, Indiana home is being renovated to house the archives and exhibits of the Quilters Hall of Fame and can be toured during Celebration 2001, July 19-22. The Indianapolis Museum of Art's Webster Collection, containing Marie Webster's earliest quilts, was a gift of Mrs. Gerrish Thurber, Marie Webster's daughter-in-law. The quilts have been exhibited in the United States and Japan.

For information on the books mentioned in this article, please contact The Practical Patchwork Company, P. O. Box 30065, Santa Barbara, CA 93130, phone (805) 682-3664, or visit the web site at www.mariewebster.net. For information on the Quilters Hall of Fame, write to P.O. Box 681, Marion, IN 46952, phone (765) 664-9333, e-mail quilters@comtek.com, or visit the web site at www.quiltershalloffame.org.



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