

*The Eva Wight crazy quilt.*

# The Eva Wight Crazy Quilt

## Late-Nineteenth-Century Quilting in Central Kansas

by Marin F. Hanson

**T**he crazy quilt was born, hit its zenith of popularity, and faded from high fashion all within the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Composed of irregularly shaped and randomly placed pieces of fabric—usually silk—and embellished with profuse embroidery, the crazy quilt was a product of many influences: the greater availability of silk fabrics, the philosophies of the aesthetic movement, a new fascination with Japanese design, and the introduction of English needlework styles.

Although the crazy quilt fad began in urban, cosmopolitan areas, it soon stretched across the country, affecting the quilting tastes of rural Americans. Thanks to national publications, any woman, even in the sparsely populated Great Plains, could learn about crazywork—the making of crazy patchwork. Although normally made in luxurious silk fabrics, some women, especially those in rural areas, began making crazy quilts in more commonplace wool and cotton fabrics. One such woman was Eva Wight, a resident of Saline County, Kansas, who made a predominantly wool crazy quilt in 1891, a quilt now in the collection of the International Quilt Study Center at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.<sup>1</sup>

During the last few decades of the nineteenth century, when Eva Wight made her quilt, the divide between rural and urban was still geographically apparent, but developments in communication, transportation, and mass publi-

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1. International Quilt Study Center at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Ardis and Robert James Collection, 1997.007.0929. Primary sources on crazy quilts in nineteenth-century America include *Godey's Lady's Book*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Peterson's Magazine*. For additional information on the history of crazy quilts and quilting in America, see Penny McMorris, *Crazy Quilts* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1984); Patsy and Myron Orlofsky, *Quilts in America* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974); Elaine Hedges, Pat Ferrero, and Julie Silber, *Hearts and Hands: Women, Quilts, and American Society* (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1996); Janet Catherine Berlo, "'Acts of Pride, Desperation, and Necessity': Aesthetics, Social History, and American Quilts," in *Wild by Design: Two Hundred Years of Innovation and Artistry in American Quilts*, ed. Janet Berlo and Patricia Cox Crews (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 5–31.

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*Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 26 (Summer 2003): 78–89.



Although documentation of a quilt's maker revealed on the item itself is somewhat rare, on the Wight quilt one fabric swatch near the bottom left bears the inscription, "Eva-Wight, Salina, Saline Co., Kansas"; another, near the middle left, "May 1891."

cations were blurring the lines between these once-distinct cultures. Women such as Eva Wight, while firmly rooted in rural/small-town life, would have been exposed frequently to urban ideas and trends, and their quilts would have reflected these dual influences. Examining Eva Wight's quilt in its various contexts, therefore, helps us understand how late-nineteenth-century quiltmaking in central Kansas may not have been radically different from quiltmaking all over America.

Wight's quilt is a brightly colored wool and cotton crazy quilt. It measures eighty-one inches long and seventy-one inches wide and is constructed of three twenty-three-inch-wide crazywork panels joined together with machine stitching and surrounded by a one-inch binding. Each panel is foundation-pieced, a process whereby fabrics are attached to a foundation fabric rather than to one another with seams. Unlike most foundation-pieced quilts, the top fabrics are attached directly to the quilt's backing rather than to an intermediary fabric that would later be hidden between the top and backing of the quilt. Also unlike most other foundation-pieced crazy quilts, Wight often used her decorative embroidery stitches to attach the fabrics to the backing and only rarely used the usual method of attaching the fabrics with a sewing thread first and covering those stitches later with embroidery.

Most of the randomly shaped fabric pieces she used for the top are wool. Some are lighter-weight challis (cotton warp and wool weft) prints and some are suiting-weight fabrics in varying woven structures such as brocade, uneven plain, and twill. Wight also used a few cotton prints on the top in addition to the all-cotton backing and binding (the binding is formed with fabric folded over to the top from the backing). A few of the fabrics repeat, but the majority appear only once.<sup>2</sup>

The quilt is embellished with embroidery falling into two main categories: figurative and linear. The figurative embroidery is worked in a stem stitch using a cotton thread and depicts a range of images from teapots to butterflies to anchors. The linear embroidery, used to foundation-piece the top fabrics to the backing and to cover the places where those fabrics join, is worked in wool yarns in a wide variety of decorative stitches including feather stitch, blanket stitch, and fan stitch.

Most importantly, the quilt's embroidery includes the name of the maker and the date of the quilt's creation or completion. One fabric swatch near the bottom left bears

2. Fiber microscopy was performed on eight different fabric samples.

*Eva Wight lived most of her life in the Salina area. Her earlier years were spent on a farm east of town, and in 1916 she and her mother and brother moved into the city.*



the inscription, “Eva-Wight, Salina, Saline Co., Kansas”; another, near the middle left, “May 1891.” While signatures are more common on crazy quilts than on many other quilt styles, documentation of a quilt’s maker is still relatively uncommon. Indeed, only about 20 percent of the pre-1950 quilts in the James Collection at the International Quilt Study Center reveal any indication of the quiltmaker. These indications include embroidered initials and inked signatures and dates.<sup>3</sup>

Although not born in Kansas, Eva Wight lived most of her sixty-eight years in the Salina area. Born in 1872 in Wirt Township, Allegany (now Allegheny) County, New York, Wight’s mother and father moved the family to Kansas when Eva was just two years old. Her brother Delbert was born two years later in 1876. The family lived on a farm about two miles east of Salina.<sup>4</sup>

Charles D. Wight, Eva’s father, ostensibly had followed his brothers, Leroy O. and Franklin L., to Salina. Leroy Wight moved to Salina in 1867 where he opened real estate, loan, and insurance offices. He was a highly respected member of the community, serving as county surveyor, township trustee, and city councilman at different

points in his life.<sup>5</sup> Franklin Wight moved to Salina in 1872 and, according to a March 1933 article in the *Salina Journal*, ran a small factory in the 1870s manufacturing a hand-cranked washing machine that had been invented by one of his brothers.<sup>6</sup> He later left the washing machine business and became a contractor, constructing many houses and public buildings in Salina. Charles Wight had been a farmer in New York and continued this profession in Kansas, working the family’s farm with his son Delbert, who later became an insurance agent, justice of the peace, and police judge in Salina.<sup>7</sup>

Eva Wight seems to have led a fairly quiet life. She lived on the family farm—raising chickens, according to the 1910 U. S. Census—until 1916 when she and her mother and brother moved to Salina after Charles died in 1914. Eva Wight married very late in life and had enjoyed only a few years of marriage before she died in 1940. Her husband, Fred C. Scott, was a retired railroad man who died a year later.<sup>8</sup>

3. Of the approximately 780 pre-1950 James Collection quilts, only about 140 quilts have any record of its maker/owner. This includes information revealed on the quilt itself and in documentation that has been passed down with the quilt.

4. U.S. Census, 1880, Kansas, Saline County; *ibid.*, 1900; *ibid.*, 1910; Kansas State Census, 1885, Saline County.

5. William G. Cutler and Alfred T. Andreas, *History of the State of Kansas*, vol. 1 (Chicago: A. T. Andreas, 1883), 706.

6. *Salina Journal*, March 17, 1933. The article does not state which brother was the inventor but declares that “[i]t was a daring innovation in washing machines in those days and sold like hot cakes.”

7. U.S. Census, New York, Allegany County, 1860; *ibid.*, 1870; U.S. Census, Kansas, Saline County, 1880; *Salina Journal*, January 13, 1964.

8. *Salina Evening Journal*, August 17, 1914; *Salina Journal*, August 30, 1940; *ibid.*, September 27, 1941.



*Doing needlework was a matter of course for women in the nineteenth century. Girls would learn how to sew at a very early age, as is evident in this 1899 illustration from Lessons in Embroidery.*

Wight made her quilt when she was nineteen, an age when many young women would have been sharing the same activity. Doing needlework was a matter of course for young women in the nineteenth century. Girls would learn how to sew as early as age two or three, as they would be expected later in life to provide clothing, bedding, and other household textiles for their families.<sup>9</sup> Making quilts would have been an important skill for a young woman to hone.

In addition to the practical reasons for making quilts, over the years women also have made them for more personal or sentimental reasons. For instance, of all the quilts recorded in the Kansas Quilt Project (KQP), a statewide survey of privately owned quilts conducted in the late 1980s, more than 25 percent were made as commemorative objects. Three major categories of commemoration were found in these KQP quilts: rites of passage, private memories, and community events. Included in these categories are quilts made to mark and remember births, deaths,

weddings, friendships, wars, and elections, as well as other events.<sup>10</sup>

Historian Gayle R. Davis extends the meaning of quilt-making to include women's attempts to mediate between themselves and the outside world. Comparing quiltmaking and diary-keeping, Davis sees these activities as women's efforts to negotiate between "the role expectation that they be stoic, self sacrificing, and hard-working and their desire for some measure of personal indulgence."<sup>11</sup> Crazy quilts and other forms of "fancywork," as many forms of needlework were called, can be seen, therefore, as the perfect mediation between the Victorian expectation that women keep themselves busy in morally edifying activities and the desire to indulge in an enjoyable pastime.

An extension of quiltmaking as personal indulgence is quiltmaking as a source of personal pride. Not only did women consider needlework an enjoyable activity, the skill also allowed them to express pride in their creative and technical abilities. One newly wed woman reported that she was not only bringing to her new home her mother's quilts but also the quilts she made herself because, "I had always prided myself on the way I could piece and quilt them."<sup>12</sup>

We have no clear indication why Eva Wight made her crazy quilt. Because she embroidered her name on the quilt, we can surmise that she was proud of her accomplishment and of her needleworking abilities. Adding the location and date to the quilt might have been a gesture of commemoration, even if it were simply marking the completion of the quilt. The inscription of her name, location,

9. Hedges, Ferrero, and Silber, *Hearts and Hands*, 16.

10. Mary W. Madden, "Textile Diaries: Kansas Quilt Memories," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 13 (Spring 1990): 45, 46.

11. Gayle R. Davis, "Women's Quilts and Diaries: Creative Expression as Personal Resource," *Uncoverings: Research Papers of the American Quilt Study Group* 18 (1997): 217.

12. Elaine Hedges, "The Nineteenth-Century Diarist and Her Quilt," *Feminist Studies* 8 (Summer 1982): 295.

and date also correspond to Davis's comparison of quilts to diaries. That Wight used so many different fabrics, many of which may have been scraps from dressmaking and tailoring, adds a dimension of thrift and practicality to the quilt. So even though we have no external record of Eva's intentions, the quilt itself provides clues to her motivations for making it.<sup>13</sup>

Influences upon the genesis of the crazy quilt format came largely out of the nineteenth century's rapidly increasing global interchange. European empires had been expanding for centuries into the lesser-known parts of the world, and by the nineteenth century exposure to foreign cultures extended to the masses, rather than only to the educated and wealthy. Through their European cousins and through direct trade, Americans also began to learn about "exotic" lands, particularly of the Middle and Far East, and incorporated these new influences into their decorative arts, including quilts and other textile arts.<sup>14</sup>

Most quilt scholars point to 1876, the United States Centennial, as the "birth year" of the crazy quilt. At the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, both the Japanese Pavilion and the English Royal School of Needlework exhibit enjoyed tremendous popularity and their influence played a major role in the development of the crazy quilt. Quilt scholar Penny McMorris cites the Japanese Pavilion as the "primary source" for the sudden American fascination with Eastern design. Japanese "cracked ice" designs, asymmetrical formats, and Oriental motifs became all the rage and quickly inspired and became incorporated into the new crazy quilt style.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the more free-form English style of needlework, known as Kensington work, also found its way into women's fancywork projects and eventually became an integral part of the most elaborate crazy quilts.<sup>16</sup>

Earlier developments, however, had already laid the groundwork for the crazy quilt fad. The aesthetic movement, inspired by the philosophies of English designers

13. An examination of the *Saline County Journal* (Salina) in the months of April and May 1891 revealed no announcements of Wight family events.

14. For an overview of the influence of Asian culture on American quilts, see Marin F. Hanson and Janneken Smucker, "Quilts As Manifestations of Cross-Cultural Contact: East-West and Amish-'English' Examples," *Uncoverings: Research Papers of the American Quilt Study Group* 24 (2003): 99-129.

15. The word "Oriental" is used here as it was in the nineteenth century, as a description of the part of the world extending from North Africa through the Middle East and into the Far East, and also as a synonym for "exotic."

16. McMorris, *Crazy Quilts*, 12, 13, 20.

and writers such as John Ruskin and William Morris, urged women to use their handwork skills to beautify their surroundings.<sup>17</sup> Rejecting the "old-fashioned" quilting styles of their mothers and grandmothers, women turned to more "sophisticated" forms of needlework, including crazywork. In addition, silk, once an expensive, rarely used fabric, had become much more affordable due to mid-century trade increases with China. As a result, silk "show quilts," especially the crazy quilt, became popular status symbols. Indeed, silk became so associated with crazy quilts that by the mid-1880s women's magazines regularly featured advertisements for silk scraps to be used in crazywork.<sup>18</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that the crazy quilt initially was a product of American cities, where people were first exposed to new cosmopolitan influences and where the affluent had the means to purchase quantities of silk. Soon, however, the fad spread to provincial America, thanks in great part to the widespread influence of national publications. Magazines targeted at a female audience grew rapidly in the post-Civil War years, fueled by publishers' realizations that women were the primary consumers in American families. Indeed, women's magazines were the first to attain huge circulation numbers; for instance, in 1891, the year Eva Wight made her quilt, *Ladies' Home Journal* had a circulation of 600,000 while an older, non-women's magazine such as *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* only had a circulation of 175,000.<sup>19</sup>

17. For an excellent overview of the aesthetic movement, see Lionel Lambourne, *The Aesthetic Movement* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996). One of Morris's most important works on the decorative arts is "The Lesser Arts," a chapter in Morris, *Hopes and Fears for Art: Five Lectures Delivered in Birmingham, London, and Nottingham, 1878-1881* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1897). John Ruskin, "The Two Paths: Being Lectures on Art, and Its Application to Decoration and Manufacture" in *Works*, 1910, vol. 7 (Boston: Aldine Book Publishing, 1910), addresses most directly his ideas on the place of the decorative arts. For the affect of the aesthetic movement on other areas of American culture, see Mary W. Blanchard, "Boundaries and the Victorian Body: Aesthetic Fashion in Gilded Age America," *American Historical Review* 100 (February 1995): 21-50.

18. Virginia Gunn, "Crazy Quilts and Outline Quilts: Popular Responses to the Decorative Art/Art Needlework Movement," *Uncoverings: Research Papers of the American Quilt Study Group* 5 (1985): 131-33; Elizabeth V. Warren and Sharon Eisenstat, *Glorious American Quilts: The Quilt Collection of the Museum of American Folk Art* (New York: Penguin Books and the Museum of American Folk Art, 1996), 72. An article with several reproductions of 1880s and 1890s advertisements for silk is Kathryn D. Christopherson, "A Little Noted Chapter in the 19th Century Craze for Crazy Quilts," *Quilter's Journal* (Spring 1978).

19. Mary Ellen Zuckerman, *A History of Popular Women's Magazines in the United States, 1792-1995* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998), 21. For additional information on nineteenth-century women's magazines, see Helen Damon-Moore, *Magazines for the Millions: Gender and Commerce in the Ladies' Home Journal and the Saturday Evening Post, 1880-1910* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).



Crazy quilts were popular county fair entries. In this photo four crazy quilts are seen on exhibit at the 1894 Finney County Fair.

[f]ew Nebraska quiltmakers, especially those living during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had time to waste on frivolous activities but could justify the pleasure they derived from creating beautiful quilts by the fact that they were producing functional items for their families' use.<sup>22</sup>

But whereas urban women often had the leisure time to spend doing fancywork, their provincial sisters were leading very different lives. For women like Wight, living in rural parts of the Great Plains meant plenty of daily chores, and quilting was just one activity a woman might undertake in a day. If there was a shortage of workers on the farm, which often was the case, a woman would perform the same tasks as her husband or father; planting, harvesting, drawing water, and taking care of livestock could all be a woman's job when labor supplies were low. In addition, chores around the house—cooking, cleaning, collecting firewood, sewing clothes, and tending the vegetable garden—usually were under women's purview.<sup>20</sup>

Providing bedding was another female responsibility, but one that stimulated a measure of personal satisfaction and added a bit of beauty to frontier life.<sup>21</sup> Patricia Cox Crews, textile historian, and Michelle McClaren James, writing about women from the same region as Eva Wight, have found that

20. To learn more about nineteenth-century rural women's lives, see Glenda Riley, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988); Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840–1880* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979). For quilt-related accounts of frontier life, see Barbara Brackman, "Quiltmaking on the Overland Trails: Evidence from Women's Writing," *Uncoverings: Research Papers of the American Quilt Study Group* 13 (1993): 45–60; Carolyn O'Bagy Davis, *Quilted All Day: The Prairie Journals of Ida Chambers Melugin* (Tucson: Sanpete Publications, 1993).

21. Joanna Stratton, *Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 57–76.

One Kansas woman remembered fondly the quilts her mother made: "Such quilts! Applied patterns of flowers and ferns, put on with stitches so dainty as to be almost invisible, pieced quilts in basket or sugarbowl or intricate star pattern, each one quilted with six or more spools of thread."<sup>23</sup> Women, busy as they were with other vital tasks, still found time to create quilts, both for function and for beauty.

When women living in predominantly rural areas such as the Midwest and Great Plains became aware of crazy quilts, they, too, were attracted to the fresh, new format. Indeed, rural women adopted the crazy quilt style in great numbers. Data from the Kansas Quilt Project (KQP), the Nebraska Quilt Project (NQP), and the Missouri Heritage Quilt Project all show a particularly high incidence of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century crazy quilts, although Nebraska, for indeterminate reasons, exhibited an even higher percentage than the other two states. Both the KQP and the NQP found the crazy quilt to be among their top ten most recorded quilt styles (see Table 1).<sup>24</sup>

22. Patricia Cox Crews and Michelle McClaren James, "Continuity and Change in Nebraska Quiltmakers, 1870–1989," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 14 (1996): 12.

23. Stratton, *Pioneer Women*, 69.

24. State quilt survey projects, most of which were conducted in the 1980s as efforts to document and preserve information about quilts in private hands, recorded a wide variety of data on quilts that were brought to designated quilt registration days. Barbara Brackman et al., *Kansas Quilts & Quilters* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 33, 191; Patricia Cox Crews and Wendelin Rich, "Nebraska Quilts, 1870–1989: Perspectives on Traditions and Change," *Great Plains Research* 5 (Fall 1995): 219, 225. Bettina Havig, "Missouri: Crossroads to Quilting," *Uncoverings: Research Papers of the American Quilt Study Group* 6 (1985): 50.

**TABLE 1: PERCENTAGE OF CRAZY QUILTS RECORDED IN EACH STATE QUILT SURVEY**

KQP (1880–1925)	NQP (1880–1929)	Missouri (predominantly 19th century)*
9.3%	17.0%	9.7%

\*The Missouri project requested that only nineteenth-century quilts be brought to its quilt registration days; however, some twentieth-century quilts were recorded (approximately 21 percent of the total number).

Other sources also point to the regional popularity of crazy quilts. In a study of Nebraska State Fair premium lists, Mary Jane Furgason and Patricia Cox Crews pinpoint 1886 as the year in which “Silk Crazy Quilt” was first included as a prize category. This date reflects that although crazy quilts had been popular in the eastern United States since the late 1870s, and indeed had already passed their peak of popularity (about 1884), the fad took longer to reach the Great Plains and longer yet to be considered a common enough pattern to merit a separate competitive category.<sup>25</sup> The decreasing prize amounts for silk crazy quilts over the years mirrored the gradually waning popularity of the style: between 1886 and 1890 the prize was eight dollars; between 1893 and 1904 it was five dollars; and by 1909 it had dropped to three dollars.<sup>26</sup>

In Kansas county fairs, crazy quilts also appeared to be popular entries, although not always called “crazy.” In the 1893 Wilson County Fair, a special prize was offered for “Japanese quilts . . . or fancy silk quilts.” Similarly, in a fascinating photo of the 1894 Finney County Fair, at least four or five crazy quilts are shown on a clothes line, hanging behind all of the other typical county fair items.<sup>27</sup>

Kari Ronning’s “Quilting in Webster County, Nebraska, 1880–1920” provides another glimpse of the regional popularity of crazy quilts. Various accounts in the Red Cloud (county seat) newspaper reveal Webster County’s awareness of the crazy quilt trend. For instance, in 1884 the only county fair quilt premiums announced in the paper were for the first- and second-prize winners in the crazy quilt category. In 1887 a fund-raising auction was promoted with the lure of a crazy patchwork pillow prize. And

later, although the crazy quilt fad had begun to fade, a Webster County women’s society decided that a silk crazy quilt was still desirable enough to be offered as a drawing prize.<sup>28</sup>

Although many women had the opportunity to view national publications that would have introduced them to crazywork, they might not have had easy access to, sufficient funds for, or a preference for the fancier silk fabrics. As a result, they considered wools and cottons to be suitable replacements. Indeed, some women felt that these everyday fabrics were more appropriate for farm life and that silk satins and velvets would be out of place. These less luxurious versions of the crazy quilt often were made with utility (as well as beauty) in mind, and they exhibited less elaborate or finely worked piecing.<sup>29</sup> In addition, rural women tended to more sparingly embroider their crazy quilts, perhaps due to their busier, more labor-intensive lives. The Eva Wight quilt, made largely of practical wool fabrics and covered with small amounts of less-skillfully worked embroidery, fits squarely into this “country” crazy quilt category, a category that combines the urban roots of crazy quilts with rural economics and aesthetics.<sup>30</sup>

As with all other country crazy quilts, the Eva Wight quilt clearly is an offshoot of the mainstream “urban” crazy quilt style. Besides its overall “crazy” aesthetic, many of the quilt’s details also are consistent with its crazy quilt contemporaries. A case in point is the presence of many of the nationally favored embroidery motifs such as horses, anchors, swallows, crescent moons, stars, butterflies, and Kate Greenaway figures

25. McMorris, *Crazy Quilts*, 26.

26. Mary Jane Furgason and Patricia Cox Crews, “Prizes from the Plains: Nebraska State Fair Award-Winning Quilts and Quiltmakers,” *Uncoverings: Research Papers of the American Quilt Study Group* 14 (1993): 195, 200–1.

27. Brackman et al., *Kansas Quilts & Quilters*, 26, 27.

28. Kari Ronning, “Quilting in Webster County, Nebraska, 1880–1920,” *Uncoverings: Research Papers of the American Quilt Study Group* 13 (1992): 173–74.

29. McMorris, *Crazy Quilts*, 16; Warren and Eisenstat, *Glorious American Quilts*, 85–87.

30. See McMorris, *Crazy Quilts*, 16, 102–5.



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THE LADIES' HOME JOURNAL, PUBLISHED BY THE LADIES' HOME JOURNAL COMPANY, FARMINGTON, CT.

National publications such as the Ladies' Home Journal often placed ads in local newspapers. This advertisement, appearing in the Salina Herald for November 14, 1890, informed readers that upcoming issues of the Journal "will prove a delight to artistic Housekeepers or to any woman interested in Home Decoration, Artistic Needlework, Embroidery, and the newest creation in pretty things for the house." The ad also offered catalogs featuring Kensington art designs.

tic Needlework, Embroidery, and the newest creation in pretty things for the house." Another promised copies of pamphlets on art needlework and Kensington art designs for those who subscribed to the magazine.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, local businesses responded to the crazy quilt fad by aiming their advertisements specifically at fancywork makers. An advertisement in an 1888 edition of the *Salina Republican* read: "We are pleased to say that Mrs. M. J. Muir has a full line of new fancy goods with all the latest novelties." Another merchant advertised his "artist's materials," which probably included Kensington painting kits and other fancywork items, and assured his customers that "there is no need for ladies to scold me for not keeping a full line of supplies."<sup>33</sup>

In addition to embroidery, the printed fabrics found on the Wight quilt are important in linking it to the broader crazy quilt context. One of the most common Oriental motifs, originally made popular by the early-nineteenth-century taste for Kashmir shawls, was the paisley. The Wight quilt displays a multitude of paisleys and Indian-inspired patterns, often in vivid reds and oranges, many of which support Diane Fagan Affleck's assertion that although they were "produced in the entire range of available colors, Indian-inspired patterns most often appeared in madder-style colors whose deep, rich tones seemed especially appropriate."<sup>34</sup> Another Asian-inspired design that is present in several of the quilt's fabrics is one that Affleck calls "composite formats," a Japanese style in which one pattern floats on top of another, very different pattern. Another common print in this era was the "fake." Made to imitate

(images based on the drawings of the Victorian children's book author of the same name). One Kate Greenaway-style figure found on the Eva Wight quilt is an almost perfect match to one from a page in the 1884 crazywork pamphlet *Crazy Patchwork*. Two other embroidered motifs on the Wight quilt can be found in nearly identical form on an 1896 Pennsylvania crazy quilt, suggesting that reproductions of design motifs were widely available. Wight also seems to have heeded the admonishment that crazy quilts contain as few straight lines as possible; at certain points she purposely altered the course of her embroidery lines away from the fabric seams, making the lines more curvilinear.<sup>31</sup>

Wight might have seen examples of these styles of embroidery in a variety of sources. National publications such as *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Godey's Lady's Book* often placed advertisements in local newspapers to encourage women to subscribe. One advertisement for *Ladies' Home Journal* appearing in the *Salina Herald* informed readers that upcoming issues "will prove a delight to artistic Housekeepers or to any woman interested in Home Decoration, Artis-

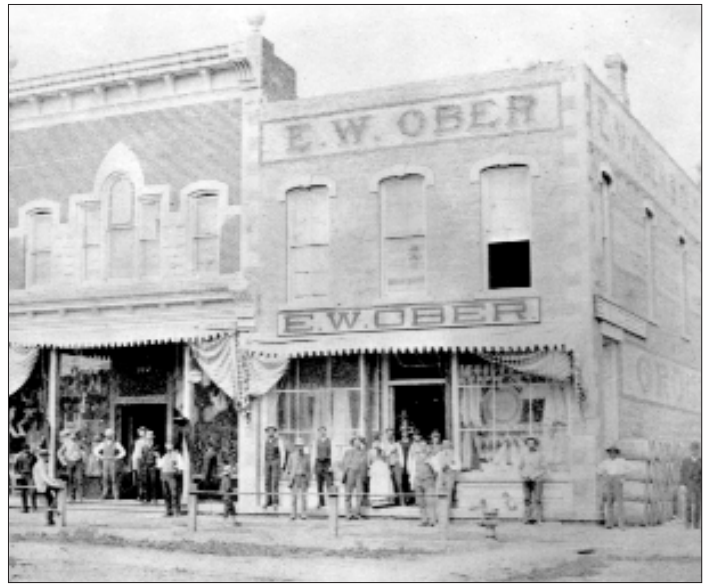
31. *Ibid.*, 18, 48, 10.

32. *Salina Herald*, October 31, November 14, 1890.

33. *Salina Republican*, September 7, 1888; *Salina Daily Republican*, September 18, 1889.

34. Diane L. Fagan Affleck, *Just New From the Mills: Printed Cottons in America* (North Andover, Mass.: Museum of American Textile History, 1987), 66.

*In the 1880s and 1890s Salina had plenty of dry goods stores to provide quiltmakers with the necessary materials. Among the town's dry goods merchants was E. W. Ober, whose store is depicted here in ca. 1890.*



more complicated woven or treated fabrics, the imitation print was a cheap alternative to expensive luxury fabrics. Some of the common fakes were made to look like seersucker, moiré, damask, oxford, basket weave, and warp-print (ikat), a style that the Wight quilt displays prominently in several swatches.<sup>35</sup>

These nationally popular fabric styles would have been readily available to Wight and her Salina neighbors. It is clear from examining local newspapers from the 1880s and 1890s that Salina was a bustling town with plenty of dry goods stores to provide quiltmakers with raw materials. Some of the most frequent dry goods advertisers—E. W. Ober, McHenry and Co., Litowich and Wolsieffer, and Rothschild Brothers—all featured a wide variety of fabrics, including worsteds (wool fabrics), muslins, printed cottons, and silks. Furthermore, stores from large metropolitan areas such as Kansas City and New York City also advertised their dry goods and delivery services. Clearly, silk was available in Salina for making a standard, “urban” crazy quilt; however, women such as Eva Wight—leading labor-intensive lives on farming incomes—likely would have purchased fabrics that they could use for other purposes (dressmaking, for instance) and that they could afford.

But were other women from this part of Kansas also making crazy quilts? Analysis of the KQP data indicates that they were. Of the 1,706 quilts recorded in the Saline County region, forty-six crazy quilts from all eras were recorded, placing the percentage of crazy quilts in this part of Kansas at 2.7, a figure that echoes the greater Kansas percentage of crazy quilts (2.4).<sup>36</sup> To determine the popu-

larity of crazy quilts in this area at the time that Wight made her quilt, this data can be broken down further into an 1880–1900 range; of the 188 quilts dated 1880–1900, 22 were crazy quilts. Once again, this percentage, 11.7, echoes the figure the KQP calculated for the entire state in the 1880–1925 period (9.3 percent).<sup>37</sup> (The slightly higher percentage for the Saline County region is most likely a result of the smaller time frame being considered, a time frame in which crazy quilts were more popular in general.)

Another important piece of information that can be gleaned from the KQP data is whether Wight’s non-silk quilt reflected the fabric choices of her central Kansas contemporaries. In the 1880–1900 sample of crazy quilts, eleven of the twenty-two were made entirely of silk fabrics, the remaining portion being composed of non-silk fabrics or a combination of the two types. Eva Wight’s quilt, therefore, reflects that although many women were making crazy quilts in the traditional style, an equal number of women were likely to make “country” crazy quilts using alternative fiber choices. Furthermore, the use of non-silk fabrics in crazy quilts in the Saline County region appears to have increased after 1900, given that 63 percent of the entire sample of crazy quilts (including post-1900 quilts) was composed of non-silk fabrics or combinations of silk and non-silk fabrics.<sup>38</sup>

35. *Ibid.*, 70, 56–57.

36. To conduct its survey project of extant privately owned Kansas quilts, the Kansas Quilt Project divided the state into ten regions, each with a coordinator who arranged “Quilt Discovery Days” in locations throughout their assigned areas. The region into which Saline County falls covers eleven counties in central Kansas. Among these counties, 1,706 quilts were recorded at eleven different Quilt Discovery Days. See Kansas Quilt Project—Quilt Discovery Days, collection 207, Area F, boxes 29–39, Kansas State Historical Society (hereafter cited as Kansas Quilt Project).

37. Obtaining a percentage of these quilts was more difficult because the Kansas Quilt Project assigned many quilts to a wide date range, for instance 1880–1920, and so it is impossible to limit quilts precisely to the last two decades of the century. As a result, any quilt that included a year or range of years in the 1880–1900 period was counted. See Kansas Quilt Project; Brackman et al., *Kansas Quilts & Quilters*, 33.

38. Kansas Quilt Project.

**CLASS IV. — Household Goods.**

186	Display of Millinery and Straw goods	-	-	2	Dip
187	Best Hair Wreath	-	-	2	1
188	Display of Plain Sewing	-	-	1	Dip
189	Made Child's Suit	-	-	1	"
190	Made Gent's Suit	-	-	3	1
191	Worsted Quilt	-	-	2	1
192	Patchwork Quilt	-	-	2	1
193	White Quilt	-	-	2	1
194	Silk Quilt	-	-	5	2
195	Counterpane	-	-	1	"
196	Display of Embroidery	-	-	1	"
197	Specimen of Tatting	-	-	1	"

The premium list for the 1888 Saline County Fair shows several quilt entries, among them the "Silk Quilt," whose prize award is five dollars, an amount much greater than those of the other categories.

Saline County newspapers often listed county fair premiums, another excellent source for gauging the local popularity of quilting trends.<sup>39</sup> In 1881 and 1882 none of the categories in which women most likely would have entered, including quilts, was listed. The only reference to handwork in those years was in the listing of special premiums—premiums offered by individual businesses rather than county fair officials—and included a prize for best patchwork quilt and best display of fancywork.<sup>40</sup> In 1887, however, one newspaper included a paragraph highlighting the "Ladies Art Department" in an article about the upcoming county fair. Encouraging local women to participate, the article stated:

There are a large number of premiums awaiting the display of the art goods in the ladies' department at the fair. This is always the most interesting feature of a county fair, and it is rarely ever the case that the ladies fail to make a good showing. Let our Salina ladies come to the front at once. The premiums will cover almost everything belonging to handy needle work and artistic fancy goods of every description [*sic*]. It is hoped that the display will prove that the interest of Salina ladies has not waned in the least, and that the display will be better than ever before.<sup>41</sup>

Not only does this paragraph demonstrate the local newspaper's enthusiasm for the ladies' categories, but it also hints at the wide variety of handwork and fancywork items that were given their own premiums. Indeed, cate-

gories listed in local newspapers during the 1880–1900 time period cover almost every conceivable category: patchwork quilts, worsted quilts, chenille work, embroidery, white quilts, general fancywork, and, of course, silk quilts.

Although the silk quilt category might have included other styles of fancy or "show" quilts, it likely featured the most popular silk quilt of the day, the crazy quilt. Only two uses of the term "crazy quilt" or "crazywork" were found, however. The author of an 1888 *Salina Herald* article on the county fair noted that "the ladies' display of fine needlework exceeds any display made in former times and is a marvel in itself, consisting of crazy quilts, plain quilts of many pieces, hoods, jackets and other articles of female apparel which most undoubtedly took some time to make."<sup>42</sup> In the same year a premium was awarded to Mrs. W. J. Given for the best silk crazywork table scarf.<sup>43</sup>

The silk quilt category first appeared in the 1884 premiums, and by 1887 it was drawing a prize amount that was more than twice the amount for other quilts—five dollars for the best silk quilt, two dollars for the best patchwork quilt, and only one dollar for the best worsted quilt. Five years later, however, the prize amounts had evened out with all quilt categories receiving two dollars for first place and one dollar for second place.<sup>44</sup> Despite its prize amount falling from five dollars to two dollars, the silk quilt remained a popular category throughout the era.

Non-silk crazy quilts were never listed in the Saline County Fair premiums. Perhaps this indicates that even in

39. Quilt premium listings, both partial and complete, were found for eleven years between 1880 and 1900.

40. *Saline County Journal*, September 7, 1882.

41. *Salina Herald*, September 8, 1887.

42. *Ibid.*, September 29, 1888.

43. *Ibid.*, October 13, 1888.

44. *Saline County Journal*, October 2, 1884; *Salina Republican*, September 17, 1887; *Salina Herald*, September 23, 1892.

a small town on the Great Plains, the national/urban preference for silk crazy quilts was a strong influence. Women in small towns, aspiring to more sophisticated living and possibly having more free time than their farming counterparts, would have been drawn to making traditional silk crazy quilts.

One such central Kansas woman was Susan Snow, a resident of Junction City during the late 1880s. In letters to family members back east, Snow touched upon many aspects of small-town Kansas life, especially upper-class social life. In a letter to her mother and father, she diagrammed and described her living quarters, detailing her silk curtains, her cushion-covered bureau, and her crushed plush couch, about which she stated, "I have my fancy pillow on it and my silk quilt over it like a throw."<sup>45</sup> More likely than not, the quilt and the pillow were covered with crazywork. Snow seems to have been a typical Victorian woman, keeping herself busy with fancywork projects such as making a "splasher"—a washstand mat that often was embroidered—and making a "plush cover" for her table.<sup>46</sup> Despite the fact that she was living in a small town in the American hinterlands, Snow strove to maintain a domestic life to match that of a woman living in more cosmopolitan surroundings. Many other small-town women certainly did as well.


On the other hand, one small-town Kansas woman who felt no need to use silk exclusively on her crazy quilts was Ida Stover Eisenhower, mother of the thirty-fourth president of the United States. Living in Abilene from 1891 until her death, Ida Eisenhower made numerous quilts, including crazy quilts. Her husband previously had been involved in a dry goods business and as a result she had access to a wide variety of fabrics, many of which she used in her crazywork. Like Eva Wight, Ida made "country" crazy quilts, using wool, cotton sateens, and flannels.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, she did not follow the high-fashion crazy quilt construction:

Unlike most traditional crazy quilts in which the entire quilt is composed of randomly shaped pieces in no identifiable block or in symmetrically placed

crazy patch blocks, Ida made large asymmetrical crazy blocks of varying sizes and then attached them to complete an entire quilt.<sup>48</sup>

Living just one county east of the Wights and one county west of the Snows, Ida Eisenhower seemed to have been influenced by many of the same trends as both Eva Wight and Susan Snow, but like Wight, she chose to use more practical fabrics in her crazy quilts.

Viewing crazy quilts in two main categories—traditional "urban" silk crazy quilts and non-silk "country" crazy quilts—is both helpful *and* misleading. It is true that the silk crazy quilt originally was a product of American cities. However, it was not exclusively an urban phenomenon. As state quilt projects, state and county fair premiums, small-town newspapers, and the accounts of women such as Susan Snow indicate, fancy silk quilts also were made outside of the large American cities. Correspondingly, while the country crazy quilt was largely a non-urban phenomenon, made by women such as Eva Wight and Ida Eisenhower on farms and in small towns, it seems that non-silk quilts also were popular in urban areas. Indeed, the International Quilt Study Center holds at least two non-silk crazy quilts made in or near large American cities, including one made by Mary T. Willard, mother of the famous Woman's Christian Temperance Union leader Frances Willard, in Evanston, Illinois, in 1889. Crazy quilts of both major categories were being made all over the country, from small farms to large cities.

Examining the Wight quilt in both a national and a regional/local context, therefore, helps us understand the fluid nature of quilting trends in the late nineteenth century. Even though Eva was living in a rural and comparatively remote part of the country, she was aware of nationally popular quilt styles (albeit later than her urban counterparts would have been), probably due to the late-nineteenth-century expansion of national media. Some of Wight's central Kansas neighbors followed the mainstream construction of crazy quilts, while she and others created crazy quilts more suited to their rural sensibilities and needs. The distinction between urban and rural culture was lessening; crazy quilts were just one example of this phenomenon. 

45. Susan Snow and Leslie Snow, "North Central Kansas in 1887–1889 from the Letters of Leslie and Susan Snow of Junction City," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 29 (Winter 1963): 410–11.

46. *Ibid.*, 408; McMorris, *Crazy Quilts*, 15.

47. Carol Elmore and Ronnie Elmore, "The Life and Quilts of Ida Stover Eisenhower," *Uncoverings: Research Papers of the American Quilt Study Group* 19 (1998): 24.

48. *Ibid.*, 25.