

The Star Quilt on the Northern Plains:

*A Symbol of
American Indian Identity*

By Birgit Hans



Courtesy of the North Dakota Council on the Arts

Agnes Yellow Wolf piecing a quilt at her home on Spirit Lake Reservation, November 1986.

The colorful, intricately pieced star quilt has become synonymous with American Indian celebrations and identity on the northern plains. Visitors to American Indian communities can admire star quilts when they are placed around the shoulders of someone being honored at a powwow, in colorful stacks waiting to be distributed at giveaways, and in many other contexts. They are displayed on the walls of tribal council chambers, used as backdrops in official photographs, used in people's houses, and wrapped around newborns. Star quilts serve utilitarian as well as ceremonial purposes and, as an important commodity within American Indian communities, they also play a role in the reservation economy, especially for women.

Quilting

Quilting came to America with colonists from Europe, where quilting has a long history. Early examples of quilting can be found in museums throughout the world. The first quilted clothing in England was brought by returning crusaders, who had seen Arabs wear quilted jackets with padding that protected them from arrows. Quilted articles were mentioned in various inventories of British households over the years, and the earliest surviving English example, a bed cover, dates back to 1708.¹ Joining together layers of fabric and stuffing with stitching, then, looks back on a long tradition, and those traditions were brought to this country with English and other European emigrants.

However, as quilt historian Roderick Kiracofe points out in his work *The American Quilt: A History of Cloth and Comfort, 1750-1950*, contrary to popular misconceptions, colonial women settlers were often too busy providing for the necessities of everyday life to make quilts. While some women did make them, the process was too time consuming and the available fabrics too expensive to appeal to the majority of women. "The few quilts that remain from this period were probably made as showpieces, which explains why they have survived at all."² Quilting did not gain momentum until after the Revolutionary War, when fabric was produced and printed in America as well as imported from Europe. As the settlers moved westward from the east coast, the women brought their quilting traditions with them to their new homes. Three different kinds of quilts emerged, as Kiracofe points out:

In this early period of quilting in America, there are three basic types of quilts: the whole-cloth quilt; the high-style central medallion appliqué quilt, which was strongly influenced

by Indian quilts and palampores; and the mosaic piecework style referred to by one source as a "repeat block jammed together with others of its kind and arranged helter skelter." There were no true block quilts until the early nineteenth century.³

The "block" quilt was firmly established as the dominant quilt pattern during the second half of the nineteenth century and, as Kiracofe states, became the American quilt pattern.⁴

In the nineteenth century the hands of civilized women were never supposed to be idle, a strong tenet of the Cult of Domesticity. Approved needlework included all types, among them knitting, embroidery, and sewing of all types, including quilting. Small quilt pieces made it easy for women to carry their work with them, and they could work on their quilt tops at any time, no matter whether they had much or little time at their disposal. Quilts were utilitarian objects that were a necessity of life, even survival, but also fulfilled many other needs for women. First, they quilted for economic reasons. By using scraps and pieces salvaged from worn-out clothing, women reused resources available to them. However, the aesthetic sense of the quilters still demanded that pieces were arranged in pleasing patterns even when they used available resources exclusively.

Women who had monetary resources or enough leisure time created art quilts, such as the Baltimore albums and later the crazy quilts. Those quilts were not meant for everyday use but were status symbols and used for display or as "company" quilts. The crazy quilts sometimes contained materials from a favored dress, for example debut dresses, wedding gowns, a deceased relative's gown. These quilts were sentimental and symbolic.

Quilting also had a social dimension; women and girls within families worked together on their quilts, but, when possible, they also participated in quilting bees where neighboring women from a usually rural community came together to do the quilting which involves stitching together the three layers that make up quilts (quilt top, batting, and backing). Quilting bees established women's social networks and, in many cases, not only gave them the opportunity to socialize but also to establish an identity apart from their husbands. While their husbands might accompany them to the house where the quilting bee took place, the actual quilting was usually an all-female event. They were particularly important to women since wives did not often have the opportunity to attend gatherings without their husbands in the nineteenth century.

By the mid-twentieth century, however, the popularity of quilt had begun to wane, and quilting among the American people had almost disappeared before its renewed popularity in the 1960s and 1970s. In a recent article in the monthly magazine *Quilters Newsletter*, author John Flynn estimates that there are no fewer than approximately twenty-seven million quilters in America today.⁵ Among this number are the American Indian quilters of the northern plains.

Quilting on the Northern Plains

By the late nineteenth century America Indian girls on the northern plains were learning to quilt in day schools, in on-reservation boarding schools, and in off-reservation boarding schools. Women generally learned to quilt in missionary societies. By 1900 Christian missions were well established on the

northern plains reservations and had attained some success. There was fierce competition among the various Christian denominations for Native souls; for example, the Catholic missionaries tried to “keep the women away from the Episcopalian sewing societies by involving them in the St. Mary Societies.”⁶ Sewing and, by extension, quilting were domestic arts that Native women had to learn in order to become productive members of non-Native society, according to Anglo-American, middle-class ideas of proper nineteenth-century womanhood.

Mary Collins, a Congregational minister on the Standing Rock Reservation from 1885 to 1910, certainly echoed these convictions in her writings: “One woman had learned to iron well. The wife of Yellow Hawk, and Yellow Hawk himself is trying to become a Christian,” and “We can also hire the women to sew for us now if we cut and baste the work and such beautiful sewing as

The Language of Quilting

The Quilt:

A quilt usually consists of three layers: the top, the batting, and the back. The various fabric pieces for the top are arranged in a pattern; in the case of the star quilt the diamond-shaped pieces are arranged into eight blades. The space between the blades is filled in with background fabric, most often a solid color. The batting is almost always a thin layer of polyester today. Traditionally, it could be cotton or wool fleece, an old and torn quilt, even newspapers. The backing is a piece of fabric or several pieces of fabric sewn together. The batting is sandwiched between the top and the backing, and the three layers are pinned together for quilting. After the quilting, the raw edges of the quilt are bound.

Quilt pattern

The first step of making a quilt is to choose a quilt pattern. There are hundreds of different patterns and some patterns have different names. Here on the northern plains, American Indian women usually choose to make the eight-pointed star in its many variations.

Piecing

The basic unit of the quilt is the quilt block. The quilter will cut the necessary pieces and sew them together for the block; he or she is piecing the block. The star quilt does not have blocks, but consists of eight blades that are made of diamond-shaped pieces. The spaces between the blades are filled in with fabric triangles, the background fabric.

Quilting

After the three layers of the quilt have been pinned together (some quilters use fabric spray to adhere the



The hands of Christine Boyer, Belcourt, North Dakota.

Courtesy of the North Dakota Council on the Arts

layers together) the quilting begins. Traditionally this was done by hand and often at so-called quilting bees. Many American Indian women continue to hand quilt; a very common pattern consists of half circles. The quilting stitches show the skill of the quilter, since stitches ideally should be small and even. Today quilts are sometimes quilted on sewing machines or given to businesses that specialize in that task. Another way of holding the layers together is by tying, in which thread or yarn is stitched through all three layers and tied in a knot.

Binding

The raw edges of a finished quilt must be bound. The quilter sews together strips of fabric until the strip is long enough to edge the entire quilt. Then the strip is sewn to the quilt, turned over the raw edge, and the other side sewn to the quilt to cover the raw edge.



The girls sewing class at the Fort Totten Indian School in 1913.

they do would surprise you.”⁷ In an 1886 letter Collins wrote:

The homes are feeling the influence of the lessons taught in school. We find fathers building houses of logs in order to make the children content to stay at home when they return from the school. Mothers make quilts of bright bits of calico and curtains of scarlet or blue for the windows and so our little ones leave a home where there is no sign of home comfort and often return to a home that has much to make their lives more pleasant---while the teachers are laboring in season and out-of-season for the training of the children, the missionaries are laboring also in the homes.⁸

Mary Collins, like other missionaries and teachers, subscribed to the middle-class social standard that the proper role of the woman was in the home, providing for the physical comfort of her family. Sewing was very much a part of a woman’s work. The federal government, of course, reflected these ideas in its policy making, entirely oblivious to the fact that American Indian women had always been in charge of the private sphere of their lives.⁹ In fact, the ideals of Anglo-American middle-class womanhood that were being imposed on them curtailed their traditional decision-

making powers and their social status.

American Indian women learned to piece a great variety of quilting patterns in schools and in missionary sewing societies. Frank Fiske started his career as a photographer in Fort Yates on the Standing Rock Reservation in 1900, and his photographs document many aspects of American Indian life of his time. Some of his photographs document quilts hanging over building rafters and on walls at the various agricultural fairs on the Standing Rock Reservation. As the photographs show, occasionally women chose the Morning Star as their pattern, the large star that is typical for the quilt pattern we know as star quilts today, but the majority of the quilts show other patterns. Major John Brennan, superintendent on the Pine Ridge Reservation from 1900 to 1917, also took a number of photographs of the Lakota people and their way of life. A series of his photographs depicts a giveaway, and one photograph shows quilts hung over a rope. Here too a star quilt is one of several quilts but no more prominent than others. At least one horse has a blanket spread over its back in the Brennan photographs, but it is not a star quilt either. A star quilt is thrown over a wagon seat, however, in yet another photograph.¹⁰ American Indian women seem to have chosen any pattern that appealed to them, either aesthetically or because they had the resources to make a quilt in that pattern.



A giveaway and feast at Standing Rock Reservation, early 1900s, photographed by Frank Fiske. Giveaways are held to mark an important event in an individual's life or within a family. Gifts are given by the honored individual and his or her family to those who have been helpful. For example, if a student graduates from college, the student and his or her family may give gifts to everyone who has helped the student. If someone dies, the family may have a giveaway to honor those who have been important in that individual's life. Star quilts have become important gifts at giveaways.

Despite the photographic record, many Native women I talked to about star quilts told me that the star pattern was not used until the 1950s. It is likely that star quilts were made but were not on public display in earlier years, especially if they were used in various American Indian ceremonies that the federal government attempted to eradicate between the 1880s and the late 1920s. While many American Indians converted to Christianity during those years, others continued the ceremonies out of sight of the federal representatives and the Christian missionaries on the reservations. In the ceremonies, star quilts probably replaced the painted buffalo robes that often showed patterns similar to that of the star quilt. Buffalo robes were traditionally painted by men, but women were also involved in the manufacture of sacred objects during pre-reservation times; therefore, the replacement of an object made by men for one made by women should not have been problematic. However, if the family members of the women I interviewed were primarily involved in Christian activities during that time, they would have been oblivious to the importance of the star quilt. The ceremonies, of course, continued to be conducted out of sight. During the American Indian fight for civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s, native spirituality was once

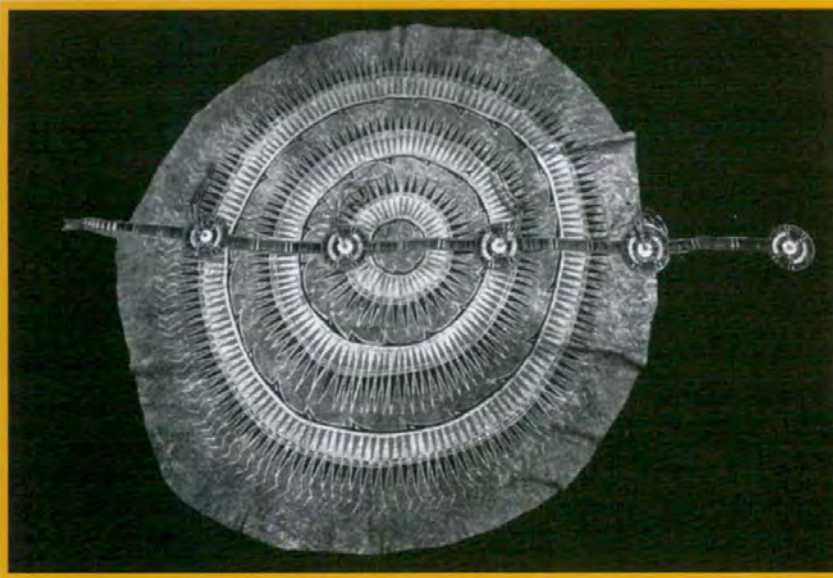
more openly practiced, and the star quilt became part of the public record. Since then, the Morning Star pattern has virtually replaced all other quilting patterns.¹¹

The Star Quilt

There are hundreds of quilt patterns whose popularity has changed during the centuries. Sandra Dallas points out in *The Quilt that Walked to Golden* that "stars were the most popular nineteenth-century quilt pattern."¹² However, the eight-pointed star of the American Indian star quilt is only one of the multitudinous star patterns that non-Native women used. The names of the quilt patterns changed as well, and the star quilt pattern is variously known as the Morning Star, the Star of Bethlehem, the Mathematical Star, the Star of the East, and the Lone Star; there may be other names as well. While the American Indian communities on the northern plains adopted the Morning Star pattern as their symbol of cultural identity in the 1950s, the pattern remains only one of many patterns among non-native quilters.

In both Native and non-Native quilt traditions the central star of the Morning Star pattern covers most of the quilt top. The mainstream American version usually has a border pieced together from smaller pieces

SHSND 9943



Circular designs composed of diamonds are a traditional form among many Native people of the northern plains. This robe, approximately fifty-two inches in diameter, has diamonds arranged in progressively larger circles. A decoration of bird quills crosses the robe. Dating from about 1850, the robe is of Hidatsa origin.

SHSND 1952-5314



Mary Bullhead stands with a painted canvas cloth in a photo taken by Frank Fiske.

SHSND C1588



Frank Fiske photographed this canvas tipi with traditional decoration on Standing Rock Agency.

SHSND 15685



Moccasins, dated from 1900 to 1909, collected from the Standing Rock Reservation.

and often uses at least one patterned print. American Indian star quilts usually have no border, and until very recently Native quilters preferred to use solid fabrics. Lately though I have seen star quilts that use print design fabrics. Some Native women say that the colors they choose for their quilts represent the traditional colors of the four directions (black, red, yellow, and white). Others simply choose colors that appeal to them or that they happen to have at hand.

The range of materials today has also led to other changes, such as the use of polyester-cotton mixes instead of all cotton fabrics and satin fabrics. Emma King from Fort Yates expresses a strong preference for polyester-cotton fabrics:

“years ago we had cotton, nothing but cotton. This polyester just came recently. But I like to use polyester-cotton [blend], it washes up nice, and the color stays, whereas with your cotton it fades. And when you’re stitching [quilting] the needle just glides along. And the batting is made of polyester, and that won’t tear.”¹³

Satin star quilts are especially valued on the northern plains and have become extremely popular in the last ten years. Ina Mae Driver from Mandaree, North Dakota, was attracted to satin fabrics when she saw them in the stores: “I thought, well, wouldn’t these look pretty on a star quilt.”¹⁴ Some American Indian women have told me that they prefer satin because it is considered fancier and the more intense colors make the star bursts more vivid. However, other quilters often mention that the satin is too slippery, frays too easily, and generally slows them down, especially if they are making a larger number of quilts for giveaways, funerals, and memorials.

The popularity of the eight-pointed star is probably related to its similarity to traditional decorative design:

The design principles and color arrangements of Sioux star quilts are remarkably similar to the geometric paintings on some nineteenth century hide robes. There is a group of painted robes in which the central design is formed by arranging diamonds in progressively larger circles. This group is represented by, among others, the “War Bonnet” and “Morning Star” patterns. The morning star design bears the closest resemblance to the star motif on Sioux quilts. Although the diamonds of the morning star are laid out in a different fashion, the overall effect of this pattern is nearly the same as that found on star quilts.¹⁵

The traditional design is often referred to as feathered circles and represented the sun as well as war bonnets signifying honor. Eventually, hide robes were replaced by Pendleton blankets and star quilts, whose original name, as Beatrice Medicine points out, translated as star robes.¹⁶

American Indian quilters have found ways of redesigning the classic Morning Star pattern to incorporate additional cultural symbols. For instance, the center part of the star often integrates an eagle, headdress, buffalo skull, or other cultural symbols. Florence Pulford talks about the importance of some of these cultural symbols to the Lakota quilter Laura Takes the Gun in *Morning Star Quilts*:

This elderly woman, with fading eyesight, talked animatedly about her quilts as if they were her children. Laura’s old treadle singer sewing machine was by one of the two windows. Here she had created many a noteworthy quilt. She was especially proud of one named Flying Sparrows and an Eagle Star quilt. The eagle, revered messenger between earth and the sky and symbol of valor and courage, was depicted in the star.¹⁷

However, not only cultural symbols are incorporated in the center of the star quilt. Some women use images from popular culture, such as Mickey Mouse and other cartoon and television characters, high school logos, basically anything that is of importance to the maker and/or the recipient. Mary Ann Helper from the Standing Rock Reservation says that she is “known for putting ‘anything’ in a star.” Her book of designs shows everything from a turtle and a buffalo to Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse. Helper says she has put every existing cartoon character into the middle of a star quilt.¹⁸ Pictorial depictions are difficult to do with a slippery fabric like satin; these quilts are usually made from cotton. American Indian quilters also play with the shape of the star. Today it is quite common to see broken stars, smaller stars in various arrangements, small stars in the corners of the central star, and many other variations. The star quilt has definitely been adapted to American Indian aesthetics.

Helper’s book of designs is known as a pattern book, a binder or folder that contains colored paper patterns for star quilts. Several Lakota quilters have shown me their pattern books. When someone orders a quilt he or she can choose from the patterns in the specific pattern book. The drawings of the star quilts are meticulously done, and they include penciled instructions on the



Viewers admire star quilts displayed at an 1988 exhibit, sponsored by the North Dakota Council on the Arts, of quilts created by Native American quilters. The eagle star quilt was made by Arlene Benson of Bismarck, North Dakota.

number of diamonds needed in each color. One woman I spoke to made one of each pattern in her binder for her mother's memorial, altogether more than eighty quilts, a huge investment of time and materials. While she managed to finish two quilt tops a day when she could work without interruptions, the tops also had to be quilted and bound. It was a tremendous time investment to finish the star quilts for the one-year memorial of her mother's death.

Needless to say, the quality of the star quilts varies, and people know who makes the best star quilts in the community. Shoddy workmanship is easy to discern even by a novice; the seams of the diamonds won't meet, which muddles the color arrangement, the quilting that holds the layers together will be done in huge stitches, there can be puckers on the front or the back, and the color choices may be less attractive. Very often a woman lacks the money to purchase the necessary fabrics or may not have access to venues where she can purchase quilting fabrics; in these cases she may use whatever is at hand. Other American Indian women create star quilts with stunning color arrangements and superb workmanship; in fact, many are exhibited in museums off and on the reservation. They are true works of art.¹⁹ However, no matter who made the quilt or what its

quality is, a star quilt is always received with respect and gratitude at a giveaway.

The Star Quilt as a Source of Economic Power

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Native peoples experienced a dire need for all kinds of fabrics on the reservations in the northern plains. The treaties promised that the annuity payments would include fabric. Take, for example, the Great Sioux Treaty concluded at Fort Laramie in 1868. Article X lists, among other things:

For each female over twelve years of age, a flannel shirt, or the goods necessary to make it, a pair of woolen hose, twelve yards of calico, and twelve yards of cotton domestics.

For the boys and girls under the age named, such flannel and cotton goods as may be needed to make each a suit of the aforesaid, together with a pair of woolen hose for each.²⁰

The treaty provisions are for clothes only, and, even though women probably had scraps left over after making clothes that were undoubtedly incorporated into

quilts, this was not enough fabric to make the quilts that were needed to survive the cold northern plains winters. Also, the annuity payments were not always delivered as promised; so even the supply of fabric for clothing, with scraps for quilts, remained tenuous.

The economic situation on the reservation was truly desperate at that time. For example, Catching Bear, a Lakota from the Standing Rock Reservation, could not afford to replace the canvas cover of his tipi and asked for flour sacks left over from distributing rations at the agency:

Rations were issued to them. The flour to be issued came in large one hundred pound sacks. Ten or fifteen sometimes twenty of these sacks sewed together made a nice large tent. It was the custom to save up these sacks to give to those who asked for them. Catching Bear, one of Sitting Bull's close friend (sic), asked for enough to make a tent as they lost there (sic) tent by fire.²¹

This letter excerpt indicates that it was a common practice to use the flour sacks for tipi covers; considering how tightly they must have been woven to hold the flour, that makes sense. However, considering the flour sacks were commonly used by American Indian women on the northern plains to make shirts and by non-Native women to make all kinds of clothing and

domestic goods, flour sacks probably provided no more than a makeshift, temporary tipi cover. Despite the tight weave, the fabric was not strong enough to withstand the weather, especially the wind, in the northern plains. Its use is indicative of the lack of fabric resources due to the poverty on the reservations during that time.

Missionaries asked for fabric and quilt pieces in their missionary letters. The Standing Rock Congregational minister Mary Collins wrote in April 1905, for example, "the women rejoice over the nice bits of calico and woolen goods sent by the friends. The churches grow in numbers and I trust in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Only a month later her letter says: "thank you for the pieces. The women's societies enjoy them and the people enjoy seeing the pretty bits on their beds when the quilts are made."²² Collins' words indicate that American Indian women during that time made quilts that were both utilitarian and *pretty*.

Appeals for quilting fabrics were also included in *The Indian Sentinel*, the publication of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, usually listed in the section "Mission needs." To give but one example:

CLOTHING: My Sioux Indians at Holy Rosary Mission would appreciate pieces of cloth or old garments to wear. Again and again many Sioux Indian women come to me with the request for *onspaspa* (pieces or scraps) to make quilts.

But I have nothing to offer. The depression also worked havoc with pieces. I have been called *Wicahinca Kuka*, (Raggedy Man). But even the rag business is not so good now. Can the readers of *The Indian Sentinel* help me out of this raggedy slump? The more useable the articles the greater my recovery. – (Rev.) Placidus F. Sialm, S.J., South Dakota.²³

Very few priests were as poetic as Father Sialm about the need for quilting materials, but many mentioned it. The clothing boxes that were sent by donors from the East coast to various reservations on the northern plains often contained clothing entirely

SHSND A0997



Women sewing a tipi cover at Fort Berthold Reservation, late 1800s.



Frank Fiske identified this photo as taking place at the Standing Rock Fair in 1917. Note the Broken Star quilt on the horse to the far left.

inappropriate for the Plains and everyday use. However, American Indian women used those fabrics in their quilts if they could not alter the garments for their needs. Velvets and silks were juxtaposed with woolen cloth. Unfortunately, there are no photographs of such quilts.

The ledger of the McLaughlin & Spangler General Merchandise store at Fort Yates on the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota indicates that individual Lakota women may have had the means to buy occasional pieces of fabric.²⁴ For example, on December 5, 1896, someone simply called Little Soldier in the ledger purchased “1 pr hose 45 6 yd cotton flannel 60”; the entire purchase came to “1.05.” And on November 21, 1896, a member from a well-known Native family from Cannon Ball, Mrs. Howard, bought:

25 Yds Blk Calico	2.40
4 Spools Thread	20
1 Pr ladies over Shoes	1.25
10 Yds Canton Flannel	1.50

The Fort Yates store seems to have catered to Lakota men and women, the Anglo-American officers and their wives, and other Anglo-American men and women living on the Standing Rock Reservation. The ledger shows that the store carried silk, lace, cambric, calico, muslin, gingham, ticking, oil cloth, and possibly other fabrics, a range of goods that is unexpected on any reservation during the late nineteenth century.²⁵ There is

no indication whether any of the women used the calico or any other fabrics for quilting, but it is safe to assume that at least bits and pieces went toward quilting. Lakota women may also have purchased a piece of calico or two to supplement what they had on hand.

It is unfortunate that the information on quilting during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is so sparse, because we have in all likelihood different groups quilting at Fort Yates during this time period. On the one hand, Lakota women were producing utilitarian—but pretty—quilts during this economically difficult time; it would be interesting to know how much of a Lakota aesthetic in regard to colors and composition had already developed at that time. Officers’ wives and other Anglo-American women, not officers’ wives, were also making quilts. However, even though all of these women were quilting, there would have been little or no interaction between them. The perceived social superiority of the officers’ wives would have prevented them from interacting with either Lakota women or the other Anglo-American women. Quilting would not have been a unifying bond between them.

The Native women’s societies, whose organization was encouraged by missionaries, raised money for their own needs, but were also urged to contribute money to the various missionary endeavors to “send the gospel to heathen women.”²⁶ To raise funds during those hard, often desperate times, American Indian women made traditional crafts to sell. In the case of the Catholic

missionaries, *The Indian Sentinel* advertised the goods:

Indian curios as card prizes are the very latest thing. Baskets, beaded chains, hammered silver bracelets and rings, Navajo runners and chair drapes make an attractive varieties. E.M Bouchelle, M.D., of Baltimore, Md., cleared \$96 on an Indian curio party for the benefit of the missions. The Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions can supply curios on short notice from its store in Washington, D.C.²⁷

Societies with sewing circles also occasionally bought fabrics for quilting. The papers of Mary Collins include the record book of the Elk Butte Women's Society. No further information about this society is found in Collins' papers, but it appears to be a Lakota women's society that raised money, at least in part, by selling handicrafts. The January 1, 1894, entry in the book is a list that included items such as: "Received for articles sold in society \$10.09," "Received from Alice for articles bought of Society \$1.25," "general collection \$16.75." There is also a note related specifically to quilting: "Received from Sehi-win on acc't of quilts \$1.50." On the opposite page is a further entry regarding quilts:

Paid for Calico	1.00
" " " , 18 yds @ 6cts-	1.08
" " " , 7 yds @ 7"	.56
" " 2 Rolls Batting,	.30
	<u>2.94</u> ²⁸

The Elk Butte Women's Society seems to have bought calico for the quilts that they were selling and also giving away within their community. The money to do so came from donations by society members and the sale of the curios. This early record book unfortunately gives no information about the patterns women were using in constructing the quilts. The same is true of the missionaries' writings; there is no mention of patterns. The handiwork of the women remains simply "quilts."

In pre-reservation times American Indian women were able to secure some economic independence as well as prestige for themselves and their families through their beadwork, quillwork, and other skills.²⁹ Not every woman, however, was an expert quillworker, beadworker, or tanner, and such knowledge was restricted to women who were members of various traditional societies.

"Specialization was maintained in two ways: through the regulation on the part of the teachers



SHSND 1952-0091

The Exhibit Hall, 1912, at the Standing Rock Fair, displaying both quilts, including some star patterns, and more traditional craftwork.



Quilt exhibit at the first annual Mid-winter Fair and Corn Show, Standing Rock Agency 1931.
Photographed by Frank Fiske.

who were selective in the number of people they taught . . . and through rituals which were required to do the work without peril."³⁰

The work of women who were members of such societies had a spiritual dimension to it. Additionally, women had to meet social obligations, that is they had to give to those who had less in their communities. Generosity was a highly valued character trait of both men and women.

Early reservation times saw a decline in the status of Christian native women, since the churches' patriarchal structure replaced the complementary gender roles of earlier times. Generosity, once greatly valued, was frowned on by the missionaries. Missionary Mary Collins assessed the character of American Indian women as follows in a pamphlet she wrote entitled *Indian Womanhood*:

Generosity does not have to be taught to the Indian woman, neither hospitality. In fact we as missionaries have had to try to instruct them to be more careful and saving in order to accumulate property. The old religion impressed them with the idea that their gods loved the cheerful giver, and that stinginess would be thought not to care for the dead one if they withheld anything. It was like the old

Bible hire mourners. People who went to the home to weep with the bereaved would carry away with them anything they saw. When Running Antelope's daughter died, he gave away everything they had, even to his own blanket, and appeared in an old cast-off horse blanket. So it was a difficult task to train the women or men either to economy. And when they are Christians they are more than willing to divide their all with the church, and to give of their poverty to the cause of the Missions.³¹

To Collins and other middle-class reformers, generosity is only admirable if it follows the prescribed Christian ways. The women's societies with their emphasis on church and work were one way in which missionaries hoped to retrain American Indian women to fit into the mainstream Cult of Domesticity.

American Indian women, however, used these societies as a form of resistance, which non-Natives did not always recognize. First, the women's societies organized by the various Christian denominations permitted them to meet in a group, something that was otherwise frowned on during early reservation times. In this way, American Indian women continued to work cooperatively as a group, but the emphasis on the social aspect of their work led to a loss of the spiritual dimension that had been inherent in traditional

women's societies. In many ways the social emphasis devalued their work. Secondly, the women's societies permitted them to fulfill some of their traditional obligations of generosity. Historian Rebecca Kugel has written how Ojibwa women in Leech Lake, Minnesota, used Episcopal church institutions to maintain some of their traditional roles and power within their communities, just as the Native women of the Plains were struggling to do:

In the early 1880s, Bonga Wright and other Leech Lake Episcopal women had "begun the good work" of organizing a sewing circle. Bonga Wright assured Bishop Whipple that meetings always opened with prayer, and that the women "do not seek *earthly* reward." The Episcopal hierarchy approved heartily, and encouraged all Ojibwe converts to commence such women's meetings. Not only did sewing circles allow Ojibwe women to perfect their new skills of housewifery, the meetings also engaged them in appropriately female charitable work.

Beneath the surface of Susie Bonga Wright's pious remarks, however, lies another, more significant layer of meaning. At the same time they sought to learn the new skills, Bonga Wright and the other Episcopal women reaffirmed their commitment to the traditional Ojibwe redistributive economy. The new-style Anglo-American clothing and bedding made at the sewing bees was "*carefully* given to the needy." The women sought to reinforce community solidarity and avoid partisanship.³²

Eventually, the non-Native Episcopal leadership opposed the Ojibwa women's outspoken participation in community issues while the Ojibwa leadership continued to accept the reciprocal gender roles of pre-reservation times.³³ For the Ojibwa women, the sewing circles gave them the opportunity to fulfill their kinship and community obligations and to exert some leadership in their new life.

American Indian women of the northern plains used the sewing circles in similar ways. The sewing circles also permitted them to continue to exert control over the existing resources and the goods they manufactured as

they had done in pre-reservation times. Since many of the goods, such as clothing and quilts, were essential to the survival of American Indian communities, they continued to be a force to be reckoned with. American Indian women found a way to redefine their roles within the structures imposed by the federal government and the various Christian denominations.

Today the star quilt is an integral part of American Indian cultures on the northern plains and assures an important role for American Indian women in the reservation economy. Take, for instance, the family of Mary Ann Helper on the Standing Rock Reservation. In addition to holding a full-time job, Mrs. Helper makes star quilts, both for family giveaways and to sell. Only one of her three daughters sews, but everyone in her household, whether male or female, helps with cutting the diamonds when she is busy and needs to get quilts done. Quilting is a family affair, and she considers this cooperation within the household as traditional and very important. Star quilts play an important role in both traditional ceremonies and Christian churches. Not every American Indian family includes a person who is a quilter though, and if a larger number of quilts is needed, the family faces a larger outlay of money than others that can produce the needed quilts themselves.

Funerals, for example, usually require at least one star quilt to cover the coffin, and Medicine describes in "Lakota Star Quilts" how families deal with this demand:

No matter how poor a Lakota family may be, there is a concerted effort to obtain a star quilt for the funerary rites. Upon hearing of a death in their family, many women of all ages quickly gather to make the requisite quilts. Working



Women's sewing meeting on the Fort Berthold Reservation, 1897

SHSND 0041-0401

efficiently, they are able to produce one in approximately four hours. These may be hand-quilted or simply "tied" with yarn or thread. If the quilters are not paid immediately in cash, they are compensated by gifts a year later during the memorial feast.³⁴

Today some families decide to wait with the giveaway until the memorial a year later and only procure the quilt that will cover the coffin. After the wake, that quilt may be placed in the coffin to be buried with the deceased or given to someone at the funeral. In many families women still work together when there is a death in the family. Tressa Berman describes such an occasion on the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota:

Women gathered up their goods—hand-sewn pillows, blankets, and shawls—and immediately after Lizzy's death, began the daily rounds of soliciting donations of goods, time, and skills, especially sewing. Sewing is the literal thread connecting kinship. With the precision of a jeweler, women crafted quilt upon quilt, until a mound of star quilts seemed to reach up to the Seven sisters who descended from the sky to become the stars themselves. It felt as though everyone who was connected to Lizzy was busy sewing star quilt tops that week. Pam, a relative by marriage, collected the quilt tops and brought them down to an Indian-owned quilting business to be sewn.³⁵

American Indian women living on reservations on the northern plains still face limited access to fabrics, and starting a new quilt often requires trips into the surrounding towns or the nearest cities. Some may even order fabrics online. Stores like the Ben Franklin in New Town on the Fort Berthold Reservation, North Dakota, carry a surprising range of quilt fabrics and often have sales. With careful shopping for sale prices, it may be possible to buy the fabric for the pieced top, the batting, and the backing for a smaller star quilt for approximately one hundred dollars. Nevertheless buying the fabrics necessary for the star quilts of a giveaway is a very expensive proposition for most families. On the Fort Berthold Reservation the tribal council has established a wake fund to help families partially defray the costs of the funeral and, thereby, the cost of at least the initial star quilt needed.³⁶

Reservation economics are based in part on an informal exchange of goods and services. Star quilts are definitely an important item of exchange on the

reservations in the northern plains. When I recently talked to several American Indian people from various reservations on the northern plains, I was told that it is not as easy as it once was to find star quilts. An older woman from the Fort Berthold Reservation, for instance, told me that many of the older women she depended on for star quilts and who were part of her kinship group have passed on and she has had to buy quilts from a young woman who is unconnected to her family and clan. This requires a larger outlay of money on her part, especially when the quilt is needed fairly quickly. In exchange for the star quilt she needed for a War Bonnet Dance (explanation?), the older woman paid the electricity bill of the quilter rather than paying directly for the quilt. She didn't trust the younger woman to spend that much money wisely, and in this way ensured that the woman's children benefitted from the sale. Star quilts are also traded for food, diapers, and other commodities necessary in daily life.

The value that American Indians of the northern plains place on star quilts and the fact that they are not always readily available creates an economic niche for some quilters. The job opportunities on the reservations of the northern plains are limited, and in 2010 the unemployment rates hovered at 16.4 percent in contrast to non-Native unemployment rates at 6.3 percent.³⁷ Even if jobs were available, many women could not take advantage of them, since their child-care obligations would prevent them from doing so. Reservations populations are young populations, according to a 2006 study of American Indian children in North Dakota. More than two-in-five American Indians [living on reservations in North Dakota] . . . were younger than age 20 in 2004," which would make it difficult for women to work outside their homes even if jobs were available.³⁸ Quilting may provide a workable cottage industry for them. As Medicine pointed out, quilters have always been compensated for their work, whether with goods or money, even if it was the extended family that produced the needed quilts. As she said: "If the quilters are not paid immediately in cash, they are compensated by gifts later during the memorial feast."³⁹ Payment is not a violation of the cultural norms then, but a cottage industry that may increase the price of a star quilt significantly.

To establish a cottage industry for American Indian arts and crafts and even for quilts is not a new idea. Unfortunately, these attempts are often dependent on federal funding and are bound by federal guidelines, which have rarely reflected the realities of reservation life and the needs of contemporary American Indian women. States in the northern plains are trying to attract more

tourists as part of their economic development. One problem with such development is, as Medicine mentions in “Lakota Star Quilts,” that tourism is a problematic focus in the case of the star quilt. Well-made star quilts require a major time investment and some initial monetary outlay for fabrics and batting, and tourists are reluctant to buy such expensive items as souvenirs when they can buy Indian trinkets produced abroad to commemorate their trip to the northern plains.⁴⁰ It does not mean, however, that all attempts to establish quilt industries have failed. Medicine mentions two such enterprises, and an internet search located several other American Indian quilt businesses on the northern plains.⁴¹

The Ceremonial Star Quilt

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century the federal government, its reservation representatives, and Christian missionaries did their best to eradicate American Indian spiritual beliefs and ceremonies. The ceremonies never ceased but went underground. It was not until the 1960s that ceremonies became part of everyday public life on the northern plains once more. By that time the traditional buffalo hides used in ceremonies had been replaced by the star quilt. Today star quilts play an important role in both traditional ceremonies and Christian churches. They are needed at bonnet ceremonies, giveaways, baptisms, church decorations, funerals, at a *Yuwipi*, and on many other occasions. During a *Yuwipi*, a Lakota healing ceremony, the medicine man is usually wrapped in a star quilt and tied up; his spirit helpers will then release him. Another ceremonial use on the Standing Rock reservation is by the Catholic church, which places different color star quilts behind the altar cross to signify the seasons of the liturgical year.

In contrast to pre-reservation times when decorated ceremonial items were made by women who were members of the women’s societies with their own spiritual observances, everyone can make a star quilt for ceremonial purposes today, just as everyone can learn how to quilt. However, the roles of American Indian women are not so very different from the way they were in pre-reservation times. Women helped to make ceremonial goods then, too, that is, they tanned the hides, made and decorated containers that held ceremonial articles, and so forth. In contemporary times



Dr. Tony Lingham receives a star quilt May 17, 2011, as a token of appreciation. From left to right are Dr. Herbert Wilson, Dr. Tony Lingham, Scott Eagle (holding quilt), and Martin Cross. The quilt was donated by Marilyn Hudson, who had received it at a memorial of a friend who passed away several years earlier.

Courtesy of Marilyn Hudson

American Indian women control the number of quilts available, their production, and the price of the quilts.

Quilting has been established on the northern plains for more than one hundred years. Introduced as part of the federal government’s and Christian churches’ attempt to assimilate American Indian women, it offered quilters the opportunity instead to maintain gender roles in defiance of expectations and to eke out a precarious economic niche for themselves. As one well-known quilter, Mary Brave Bull McLaughlin, from the Standing Rock Reservation, told me: “Since the 1800s quilting has just been a different way of artistic forms for Native people.”⁴² On the northern plains, however, the adoption and reinterpretation of the mainstream quilting pattern Morning Star by American Indian women has created a distinct symbol of American Indian identity.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the American Indian women quilters who generously shared their knowledge about quilting with me; they greatly enriched my life! I also need to acknowledge the help and encouragement that I received from Barbara Handy-Marchello, Mary Jane Schneider, and Ursula Hans.

Author

Dr. Birgit Hans is a Chester Fritz Distinguished Professor at the University of North Dakota. Dr. Hans has been a member of the Indian Studies department at UND since 1991. Her specialty is American Indian literature and oral traditions. She received a Ph.D in English from the University of Arizona in 1998.

Endnotes

1. Planetpatchwork.com/passtvq/tvq26/England.html
2. Roderick Kiracofe, *The American Quilt: A History of Cloth and Comfort 1750-1950* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1993), 53-59.
3. Ibid. 62-63
4. Ibid. 48.
5. John Flynn, "Quilter at Heart," *Quilters Newsletter* 38 (November 2007): 28.
6. Karl M. Kreis, *Lakota, Black Robes, and Holy Women: German Reports from the Indian Missions in South Dakota, 1886-1900* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 56.
7. Mary Collins Family Papers, Collection H80-014, Box 1, Folder 34, South Dakota State Historical Society (SDSHS).
8. Mary Collins Family Papers, Collection H80-014, Box 1, Folder 10, SDSHS.
9. In a pamphlet published by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1911, "Some Things that Girls Should Know How to Do and Hence Should Learn How to Do When in School," a whole section is devoted to sewing (pp 18-20); the lesson plans concentrate on clothing for the family and do not mention quilts specifically.
10. John R. Brennan Collection, Collection FB 106, Album 1, SDSHS.
11. Marsha L. Macdowell, "North American Indian and Native Hawaiian Quilting" in *To Honor and Comfort*.
12. Sandra Dallas (with Nanette Simonds), *The Quilt that Walked to Golden* (Breckling Press, 2004), 5.
13. Christopher Martin, ed., *Native Needlework: Contemporary Indian Textiles from North Dakota* (North Dakota Council of the Arts, 1988), 30.
14. Martin, *Native Needlework*, 24.
15. Beatrice Medicine, "Lakota Star Quilts: Commodity, Ceremony, and Economic Development," in *Learning to be an Anthropologist and Remaining "Native": Selected Writings*, ed. Beatrice Medicine with Sue-Ellen Jacobs. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 168.
16. Beatrice Medicine, "Lakota Star Quilts: Commodity, Ceremony, and Economic Development," in *Learning to be an Anthropologist and Remaining "Native": Selected Writings*, ed. Beatrice Medicine with Sue-Ellen Jacobs. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 168.
17. Florence Pulford, *Morning Star Quilts* (Los Altos, CA: Leone Publications, 1989), 38.
18. Personal communication, 2008. All other references to Mrs. Mary Ann Helper refer to the same conversation.
19. A particularly stunning star quilt can be seen in connection with the Fort Berthold tribal college. The middle of the star shows the Missouri River and the backside of the college buildings. The traditional gardens of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara are also depicted on the other side of the river. In the sky hover the Thunder Beings. Two detailed feathers are appliquéd to the quilt. The quilt is absolutely amazing.
20. Francis Paul Prucha, *Documents of United States Indian Policy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), 113.
21. Walter Stanley Campbell Collection, Box 104, Folder 14, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.
22. Mary Collins Family Papers, Collection H80-104, Box 2, Folder 30, SDSHS.
23. Placidus F. Sialm, "CLOTHING," *The Indian Sentinel* 13 (3) (Summer 1933): 130.
24. Franke Bennett Fiske Papers, MSS 10105, Box 2, State Historical Society of North Dakota. The ledger indicates that Lieutenant Wilson bought "Indian trinkets" for one dollar on December 19, 1896. These "Indian trinkets" must have been sold or traded to the store by the Lakota people living on the Fort Yates Reservation.
25. Frank Bennett Fiske Papers, MSS 10105, Box 2, SHSND.
26. Mary Collins Family Papers, Collection H80-014, Box 3, Folder 40, SDSHS.
27. *The Indian Sentinel* 3 (July 1923):140.
28. Mary Collins Family Papers, Collection H94-014, Box 5721a, Folder 3, SDSHS.
29. Mary Jane Schneider, "Women's Work: An Examination of Women's Roles in Plains Indian Arts," in *The Hidden Half: Studies of Plains Indian Women*, eds. Patricia Albers and Beatrice Medicine. (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983), 109.
30. Schneider, *The Hidden Half*, 111.
31. Mary Collins Family Papers, Collection H80-014, Box 2, Folder 40, SDSHS.
32. Rebecca Kugel, "Leadership within the Women's Community: Susie Bonga Wright of the Leech Lake Ojibwe," in *Midwestern Women: Work, Community, and Leadership at the Crossroads*, eds. Lucy Eldersveld Murphy and Wendy Hamand Vener. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 23-25.
33. Kugel, "Leadership within the Women's Community," 26.
34. Medicine, "Lakota Star Quilts," 169.
35. Tressa Berman, *Circle of Goods: Women, Work, and Welfare in a Reservation Community* (State University of New York Press, 2003), 36.
36. Berman, *Circle of Goods*, 38.
37. Algernon Austin, "Different Race, Different Recession: American Indian Unemployment in 2010," Economic Policy Institute, Issue Brief #289, November 18, 2010, 3 (www.epi.org). The northern plains are defined as including Idaho, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming.
38. North Dakota Kids Count, "2006 Overview of Children's Well Being in North Dakota: A Focus on American Indian Children" (Fargo: North Dakota State University, 2006), 6.
39. Medicine, "Lakota Star Quilts," 169.
40. Medicine, "Lakota Star Quilts," 170. Even the tribal casinos located on the reservations in the northern plains carry primarily Medicine's Indian trinkets in their gift shops; however there will usually be a few star quilts and a few items of American Indian art, for example beadwork or carvings or paintings, among them. It is sometimes difficult to locate the genuine pieces of art among the rest, and they are significantly more expensive.
41. Medicine, "Lakota Star Quilts," 170.
42. Personal communication, 2008.