The Patchwork Quilt

Often a quilting was the occasion for a young lady to announce her engagement, and her hope-chest quilts would be quilted. A girl usually did not quilt her quilt tops until she was reasonably certain of marriage, for it meant a real outlay of money to provide the cloth for the linings and the filling for the interlinings of her dozen or so quilts.

In writing of such an affair, Thomas Hamilton Ormbsbee tells of the significance of the heart design used in connection with the quilts of a prospective bride, and many stories have come down to us relative to that very special quilt called the Bride’s Quilt. The stories are much the same in essence. Most agree that it was supposed to be made by the bride-to-be, whether it was made during the years before she became engaged with the hope of marriage in mind, or made nearer the wedding date—the very last of her hope-chest quilt tops to be finished.

Perhaps no form of folk art ever developed into a greater “hearts and flowers” affair than the patchwork quilt in America. From its practical and prosaic beginnings, it became interwoven with romance until it fairly dripped with sentiment.

The quilting bees were one of the few social diversions outside the church, ranking high in popularity with the church socials and the box suppers. Here the background for romance was provided, the bee serving as a kind of matrimonial bureau for all ages.

Little girls were brought up on stories of hope-chest quilts and Bride’s Quilts and, just as they did their daily “stents” on their samplers (for “idle hands were the devil’s work tools”), they learned early to work on their quilt squares. No doubt the samplers with their pious mottoes and carefully worked alphabets were more edifying, but the making of a quilt square could be more exciting. It just might develop into a Bride’s Quilt! There are records of little girls starting their Bride’s Quilts at the tender age of eight and nine years.

That Bride’s Quilt! In this machine-made articles, it’s the thought, time, and effort choice of the pattern alone carried variations of the over-hearts or hearts in a Other sentimental designs Wedding Rings, Love and Crescent Moon, signifying a long life together, a variation of Oak Leaves, day of mass production and quite staggering to consider that went into its making. The was of great moment. Many heart motif, such as hands-four-leaf clover arrangement. included Lovers’ Knots, Linked Rose, Cupid’s Arrowpoints, fying virginity. Looking for-the couple might decide upon a pattern foretelling longevity.

Often the young man involved would help his young lady work out the design for the quilt and also the
pattern for the quilting. We can imagine their choosing some favorite flower as they courted in the old-fashioned garden.

The main difference in the stories pertaining to the Bride’s Quilt seems to be in the number of quilts required to make up a proper dowry. Some say that there should be twelve in the dowry and that the thirteenth, the bride’s very own, brought the number up to the thirteen of a “baker’s dozen.” Others claim that the number of dowry quilts need be only twelve, starting with the goodly number of ten which could be made by the bride, her mother, or her friends. To these, the bride-to-be added hers, of course made by her own hands. Then, at the time of marriage, a twelfth quilt, a Freedom Quilt, was added by the bridegroom, thus completing the good round dozen.

A Freedom Quilt rivaled the Bride’s Quilt in significance, and there is much fascinating lore connected with it. Much was made of a young man’s coming of age. Custom decreed that he be given a new suit of clothes called a Freedom Suit, and in like manner it was considered appropriate that he be given a Freedom Quilt, which could be made by his mother, sister, or friends. If marriage was not imminent, his quilt was carefully laid away until the time when he decided to marry.

As an integrated lesson, students may want to research and report on some of the following items:

1. Quilting in America
2. Quilting Bees
3. Bride’s Quilt
4. Freedom Quilt
5. Dowry
6. Life style of America during the 19th century