

Iti Fabussa

Piece by Piece: Choctaw Women Quilters

Many believe the art of quilting arrived with Colonial women during their immigration to America, but quilting came much later to the United States.

In fact, quilts were not a staple in American homes until the mid-nineteenth century.

Even then, only 63 percent of households listed them among their household goods (Kiracofe 1993:59).

This increase was due to major developments in efficient transportation.

With intricate webs of roads and rail growing across the American landscape, cotton and other trade goods eventually reached even the smallest settlements.

From 1818 to 1830, the United States' demand for cotton grew from 92 million pounds to 300 million pounds (Kiracofe 1993:77). This is when quilting really began to become prevalent in the United States.

According to quilt historian, Roderick Kiracofe (1993:48), quilts from this period in history "are usually those which were made for a specific person or a specific occasion."

This month, the Iti Fabussa will focus on these special occasion quilts, or Friendship/Album quilts, made by our Choctaw community after our arrival to Indian Territory.

Friendship/Album quilts were first created in Pennsylvania, but by 1840 quickly spread throughout the United States.

This particular design made for perfect canvases to commemorate special events within a community. Women often used fabric from deceased family members' clothing, cut from outgrown or worn shirts and dresses, and with a specific purpose in mind.

Margaret Seebold (1993:81) suggests this mix of old and new fabric was to "make you think a little of the person who made it or whose dresses were in there. Maybe you don't think of them any other time except when you see that quilt."

With this, each block square was created with intention, to keep memories alive, and honorably signed by the artist.

Friendship/Album quilts feature repeated similar design blocks over the quilt top with patterned, or a solid color, rectangular bands in between, to frame them. The makers often sign their name either in the corners where blocks meet or on each block. Signatures were either applied with a stamp using a stencil or handwritten in ink directly onto the fabric.

At the Wheelock Academy, female students combined their friendship with their newly learned sewing skills to create such a Friendship/Album quilt shortly after our removal to Indian Territory.

A fine example is currently on display at the Wheelock Museum in Millerton, Oklahoma.

These young women not only intricately embroidered each flower on blocks throughout the Friendship/Album quilt, but also signed each of their squares with their delicately scripted signatures.

This is an exquisitely, rare sample from our early Choctaw quilt makers.

One Wheelock Academy student, Odetha Jean Billy, went on to create this beautiful baby blanket with the sewing skills she learned while in residence.

Her Friendship/Album quilt commemorated the birth of her granddaughter, Kathia Jean Baker Spring.

It featured four small elephants within a solid border frame. What is particularly special about this blanket is the care and attention to detail this grandmother had.

She made the ears of the elephants and tails loose, knowing her granddaughter would enjoy the sensory play time on the quilt.

The Friendship/Album quilt is a special gift to commemorate special events in a family or community (births, weddings, retirements, moves, etc.).

Friendship/Album quilts serve as vital keepers of history as well. For instance, the quilt pictured above was passed down to Audrey Jacobs by her grandfather Rev. Simon D. Belvin, a prominent Presbyterian minister, features hand embroidered churches, names of pastors, as well as dates of each church's service.

It serves as an album, or record, of the important service work of the Presbyterian Faith within the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma over time.

More recent in history, Choctaw quilt makers used T-shirts to make a variation of a Friendship/Album quilt,

affectionately called T-Shirt quilts.

The maker carefully measures out blocks with the T-shirt design, then, pieces them together within a frame. These shirts, once pieced together, serve as an album of memories.

Choctaw tribal member, Lois Faye and her sister, Margie Spring Williams, were members of the American Hero Quilt Makers.

This group of women met once a week to a few times a month to sew Friendship/Album quilts destined to comfort wounded soldiers on their journeys home from conflict.

The quilts featured jeans donated from the community. Each square was pieced together on the quilt top and allowed to fray on its edges creating a unique border. They were designed to be sturdy to withstand the purification needed in wound centers without sacrificing aesthetic appeal.

Over time, this talented group of women nurtured their skill set by sewing over 100 quilts for wounded soldiers. So much so, that Lois Faye later went on to enter her commemorative Code Talkers Friendship/Album quilt in the Labor Day Quilt Show and won a ribbon. Countless Choctaw women have won similar prizes throughout our history.

With the advent of the highly prized Singer sewing machine in 1850, more and more women found pleasure in sewing.

It sped sewing time considerably, cutting the time to make a calico dress from 6½ hours to 57 minutes. Unfortunately, sewing machines were not prevalent in Indian Territory, or the State of Oklahoma, for decades to come.

Even then, Choctaw women did not follow this trend; they valued the time spent together. They continued to hold quilting parties (Faiman-Silva 2000:138; Gillespie and Bresenhan 2010:62).

It was during this time that they shared community news and information, learned from one another and fostered relationships.

Choctaw women continue to gather at homes, churches, camp houses, and community centers to piece together quilts today. These quilts are still entered into competitions, auctioned off as fundraisers and given to members of the community.

Over time, these quilts have become examples of the communal spirit it takes to create them. Community is a rich part of Choctaw life today and quilts are a beautiful example of this.

Unfortunately, quite a few quilters note that as they age they have no one from the younger generations to teach the art of piecing blocks to.

Do you know how to sew? Consider volunteering to help assist women create quilts in your area.

If you have stories of quilting or know of other designs and patterns used by our ancestors, please contact us at the Historic Preservation Department: Deanna Byrd (580) 924-8280 ext. 2353 or dbyrd@choctawnation.com.



Photo Provided

Rev. Simon D. Belvin was the pastor at Good Spring Presbyterian Church USA. The above quilt was made by members of the different congregations as a retirement gift. The quilt blocks are hand embroidered and picture the different churches, names of the pastors and the dates of each church's service. The quilt was passed down to Rev. Belvin's granddaughter, Audrey Jacobs.



Stickball player Ryan Spring recalled the memories and details of each T-shirt's significance pieced within the Friendship/Album quilt made by his aunt, Lois Faye Spring Ingram, for his wedding.