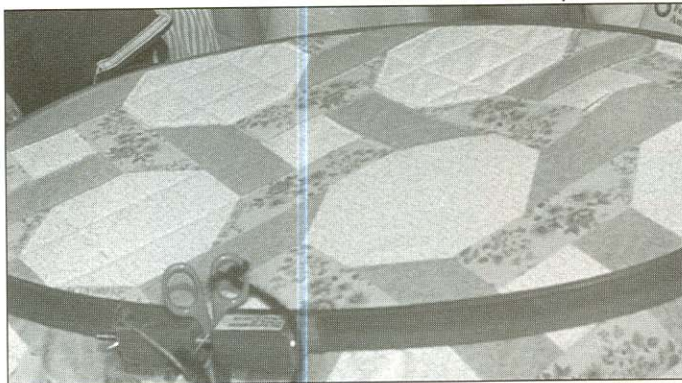


# Iowa Quilters and Their Traditions

## FRANCES BREWTON

**F**rances Brewton of Des Moines has a complicated family heritage. One of her grandfathers was the half-brother of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, born of their father's slave mistress. As a seven-year-old, Mrs. Brewton learned to quilt from her maternal grandmother, a Blackfoot Indian. As Mrs. Brewton says, "If someone moved into our area, there would be a lot of children, and not enough bedding. The ladies in that neighborhood would get together and they would piece quilts. . . . I asked grandpa, 'Everyone's got a sewing basket but me and I'd like to have one.' He said, 'Well, I'll make you one.'" (From an interview by Dorothy Dvorachek with Frances Brewton, October 2, 1996)

Mrs. Brewton and her grandfather made the sewing box out of a cigar box, using flour starch paste to glue cloth to the inside and painting it on the outside. A snap held the box together. When she did the actual quilting, Mrs. Brewton learned by using cotton filler, which was much harder to stick a needle through than the polyester filler used today.



PHOTOS BY MARTY KAPLAN

**Frances Brewton at the Smithsonian Festival.**

Although most of her quilts reflect the standard patterns popular during her lifetime (double wedding ring, nine patch, star), Mrs. Brewton has also used embroidery to decorate her quilts. In later life, she helped to put together a "memory quilt" for her church. The colors in the quilt reflect the colors of church vestments or ceremonial fabrics used to decorate for different seasons. Ladies from her church embroidered the squares, and Frances was responsible for putting all the squares together. The finished quilt hangs today in St. John's Lutheran Church in downtown Des Moines.

Like many quilters, Mrs. Brewton has taught others including women in her church, continuing education classes, and students in the Des Moines schools. She says the boys she teaches are often handier with a needle and thread than the girls. Although she no longer pieces, Mrs. Brewton continues to quilt for friends and neighbors.

## CAROLINE TRUMPOLD

Caroline Trumpold is a member of the True Inspirationist church in the Amana Colonies in eastern Iowa. Her ancestors came to the United States from Germany in the 1840s seeking religious freedom.

Mrs. Trumpold is a master quilter in the Amana tradition of whole-piece quilting. She learned her craft from her mother and other women in the community. Known for her speed as well as for her fine stitches, Trumpold quilts by herself and voluntarily works with others to create eight to ten quilts per year, a number matched only by her older neighbors.

The original Amana quilts were more utilitarian than those made today. Committed to a simple, communal lifestyle, the original Amana colonists brought along simple comforters, warm blankets rather than showy bedspreads necessary in the pre-central heating days of the nineteenth century. Traditional Amana quilts are not “pieced” like other American quilts. Instead, they were made of whole cloth, woven to fit single beds and filled with wool batting, which was “quilted” to keep it in place. Women of the seven Amana Colonies recycled the old, worn quilts, removing the wool batting and having it cleaned and re-carded to fill a new quilt.



PHOTOS BY MARTY KAPLAN

**Caroline Trumpold at the Smithsonian Festival.**

Quilting allows for innovation and adaptation to change but still operates within certain rules. Today, Amana quilts are made for double, queen-, and king-size beds, so the quilting frames have also gotten larger. Printed material is now used, as are contrasting quilting threads. Traditional quilts used the diamond pattern as the principal design with perhaps a flower print on the outside border. Over the years, other patterns entered the repertoire: the serpent pattern, hearts, flowers, and wreaths were copied from books, drawn by hand, or even copied onto linoleum or heavy paper and then cut out. Using chalk (which will wash out of the finished quilt), quilters trace designs onto the quilt top using these “templates,” straight edges, and strings. The color of the top often influences the quilted design: pink fabric often has wild roses, while blue material has forget-me-nots or irises.

Even after the Amana community was dissolved officially in 1932, traditional crafts and particularly quilting continued to be important for women in the community, providing them with a social activity and a way of identifying with their heritage. Always a community or family affair, quilting in the Amanas continues to involve women of all ages, many of whom display and sell their quilts at the Amana Arts Guild in High Amana.