



Senator John Heinz
Pittsburgh Regional
History Center



Jennie Kearns
made a crazy quilt for
her 3-year-old daughter
with the help of three
housekeepers. Typically, a date on
a quilt refers to the year of its
completion.

Quilts: Patterns of Our Past

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DALE OWENS, A Fayette County man whose life filled nearly every decade of the 20th century, worked as a gold-miner, coal-miner, lumberjack, hotel employee, at a railroad roundhouse repair shop, and as a night watchman before starting, in 1927, as an operating room technician at Uniontown Hospital, 80 miles southeast of Pittsburgh. He worked in the operating room for 45 years.

A newspaper article at the time of his retirement in 1972 estimated he had assisted more than 100,000 patients during his career. Born near Asheville, N.C., to Cherokee Indian parents, he was beloved by dozens upon dozens of co-workers, and extolled for his special ability to comfort the ill, the aged, and the young, and for his constant cheerful manner.

Where can you read more about Dale Owens and his small part in the history of Western Pennsylvania? On a queen-sized quilt at the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center. A tribute given to him by co-workers, the quilt includes a biographical sketch written in thread, and is among the 21 quilts, all marvels of homespun artistry with an engaging story to match, on exhibit in "Quilts: Patterns of Our Past." The exhibition has delighted audiences all summer long, but not much time remains to see it before it closes on November 30, 1997.

The exhibition came together this spring because Historical Society curators' wished to call attention to the quilt collection. "We wanted to showcase our extraordinary quilts, and in the process attract additional donations to fill gaps in the collection," notes Museum Director William Keyes. "Because women at all levels of society engaged in quilt making, these textiles reveal much about the history of women in our area. And, each quilt has its own fascinating history."

Almost all girls in the 18th and 19th centuries learned to sew. Most were taught at home, but formal education also focused on needlework skills. In keeping with the artisanal culture of the early 1800s, mastery of the needle was a creative outlet that also served a practical purpose. Except in upper-class homes, housewives made and mended the family's clothes, and household linens.

Sewing also served an important social function. In many regions of the country, in rural and urban settings, women passed afternoons together sewing. Quilts and samplers became cherished items of exchange for close friends and family members in the mid-1800s. "Quilting bees," or parties, provided neighbors with a chance to socialize. As women became involved in social causes in the late 19th century, they used quilting to raise money for common goals.

In the late 1800s, quilts mirrored changing tastes in home decorating. So-called "crazy quilts" reflected the growing important that women placed on personal expression, as well as asymmetry and eclecticism in design. Based on the ancient Japanese patchwork and appliqué tradition known as *kirihame*, crazy quilts helped transform the middle-class home into a nurturing retreat full of aesthetic delights.

Intimate emotions are evident throughout the "Patterns of Our Past" exhibition. Many of the quilts are outstanding examples of folk art: images spring from great love or strong feeling, and

seldom from skill at rendering objects realistically. On her baby quilt (1930), Wilkesburg resident Maude Belle McAllister's sitting bears are tender and gentle, while her horse and moose exhibit delicate shapely legs. All 12 animals on the quilt's blocks reveal McAllister's personal flair — as well they should: the quilt was for her new grandson, Robert Digby. This and others are among quilts Digby donated to the Historical Society.

Some of the textiles in the exhibition speak of larger currents in history, as well. A quilt using the "Dresden Plate" design popular in the 1930s shows economy in material and thought: some parts are made of flour sacks and fabric remnants, while the overall pattern is a somewhat somber one of simple geometric shapes.

Many visitors find the crazy quilts the most expressive and enjoyable part of the exhibition. One quilt from the home of Edward Emil and Anna Albacher Burchlaw (c. 1880), from Pittsburgh's Herron Hill neighborhood, contains more than 40 oddly shaped patches in vibrant velvet, satin, and silk. The patches feature elaborate embroidered roses and song birds, Japanese fans, insects, and even an American flag with 13 needlework stars. Period book illustrations with girls bathing babies, being courted by bowing suitors, and chatting with one another on stools are also worked in thread. While clearly the result of laborious and careful

handiwork, the quilt does not appear homemade; borders of intricate stitchery — a technique used in many other folk art forms — impart a polished, formal effect to the design.

The quilt presented to Dale Owens is one of three commemorative quilts that end the exhibition and present the modern evolution of quilt making and quilt giving. It was designed by Irene Adams (and is a gift to the museum from Mr. and Mrs. Richard J. DeCenzo). Adams' masterpiece has 32 squares in all, plus a large center area containing a stitched-and-fabric portrait of Owens, surrounded by the historical sketch of his life.

There is a 1954 Chevrolet of turquoise needlework, a Native



Letitia Coventry of Washington County (c. 1870) made two striking quilts featured in the exhibition — one for each of her children, Jarrett and Matilda.

American in ceremonial headdress, and an intricate lakeside scene with bears and fish (one being eaten). One square has samples of comments Owens undoubtedly heard over the years: "Where's my doctor?" "How long does this operation take?" and "Who are you?" (All written in thread.) And then there's the 100-odd signatures of those who worked with Owens — also all in thread.

A wonderful touch to end the exhibit is a photograph of Owens being presented the quilt at a dinner in January 1973. It makes one wish so much that cameras could have captured the looks of friends and relatives on the occasions that other quilts in the exhibition were given. Owens stands beaming between two smiling friends, the quilt stretched out before them in its folky, floral-boundary splendor. The camera catches Owens, chest thrust out, secure in his place in history. ☀