



MIZZOU

FALL 2013

28



1907

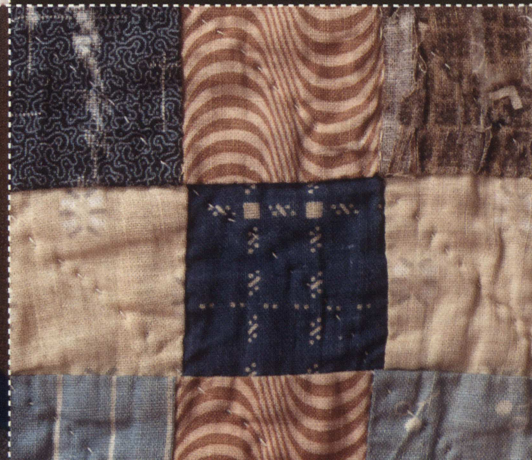
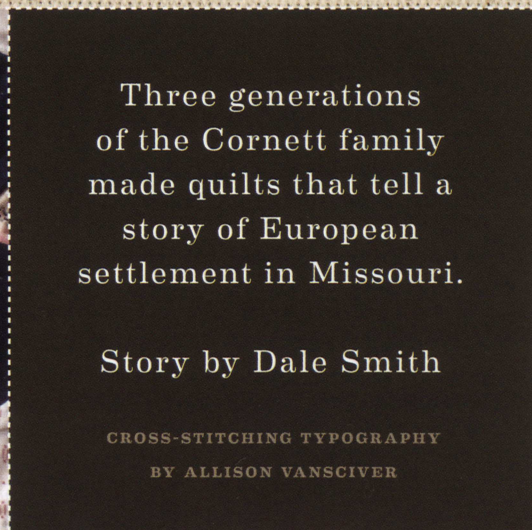


Family TRADITION

Three generations
of the Cornett family
made quilts that tell a
story of European
settlement in Missouri.

Story by Dale Smith

CROSS-STITCHING TYPOGRAPHY
BY ALLISON VANSIVER



In the northern Missouri town of Linneus, three generations of the Moore and Cornett women witnessed a century encompassing exploration of the Western United States on horseback and travel to the moon on a rocket ship. But whatever experiences might have separated the generations, quilting links them. Their sewing started of necessity and evolved over the decades into a family tradition. In a way, the women's choices of fabrics, quilt patterns and stitching motifs tell a story of European settlement in Missouri. Made between 1855 and 1940, the 41 quilts in the Moore-Cornett lineage are part of the Missouri Historic Costume and Textile Collection in MU's College of Human Environmental Sciences.



The Cornett family home.

THE STORY'S FIRST THREAD picks up during the War of 1812, when Joseph Moore of North Carolina was wounded in action. For his service, the government granted him 150 acres in Linn County, Mo., where he settled in 1842 with his first wife, Jane, and their five children. Joseph was a go-getter, owning a gristmill, starting the local school system and later serving as a judge. Jane died in 1846, and soon after Joseph married Sophia Root, with whom he had four more children.

Surviving on the Missouri frontier required a self-sufficiency that shows through in Sophia's quilts, says Nicole Johnston, the textile collection's archivist. Although steamboats hauled some retail items into the region, families often relied on what they could produce themselves. "In the earliest days, Sophia used a loom to weave some of the family textiles with yarn that was carded and spun by herself and other family members,"

Johnston says. "When clothes became too worn or damaged, instead of throwing them away, she used them as pieces for quilts." Faculty member Laurel Wilson, now retired, brought the donated Cornett quilt collection to MU in 1981.

The oldest quilts are utilitarian textiles, made entirely of homespun fabrics in the dark colors of Joseph's suits and Sophia's skirts. Johnston thinks these quilts typically started on top of the bed for warmth during Missouri winters and later were spread beneath the mattress for support and padding.



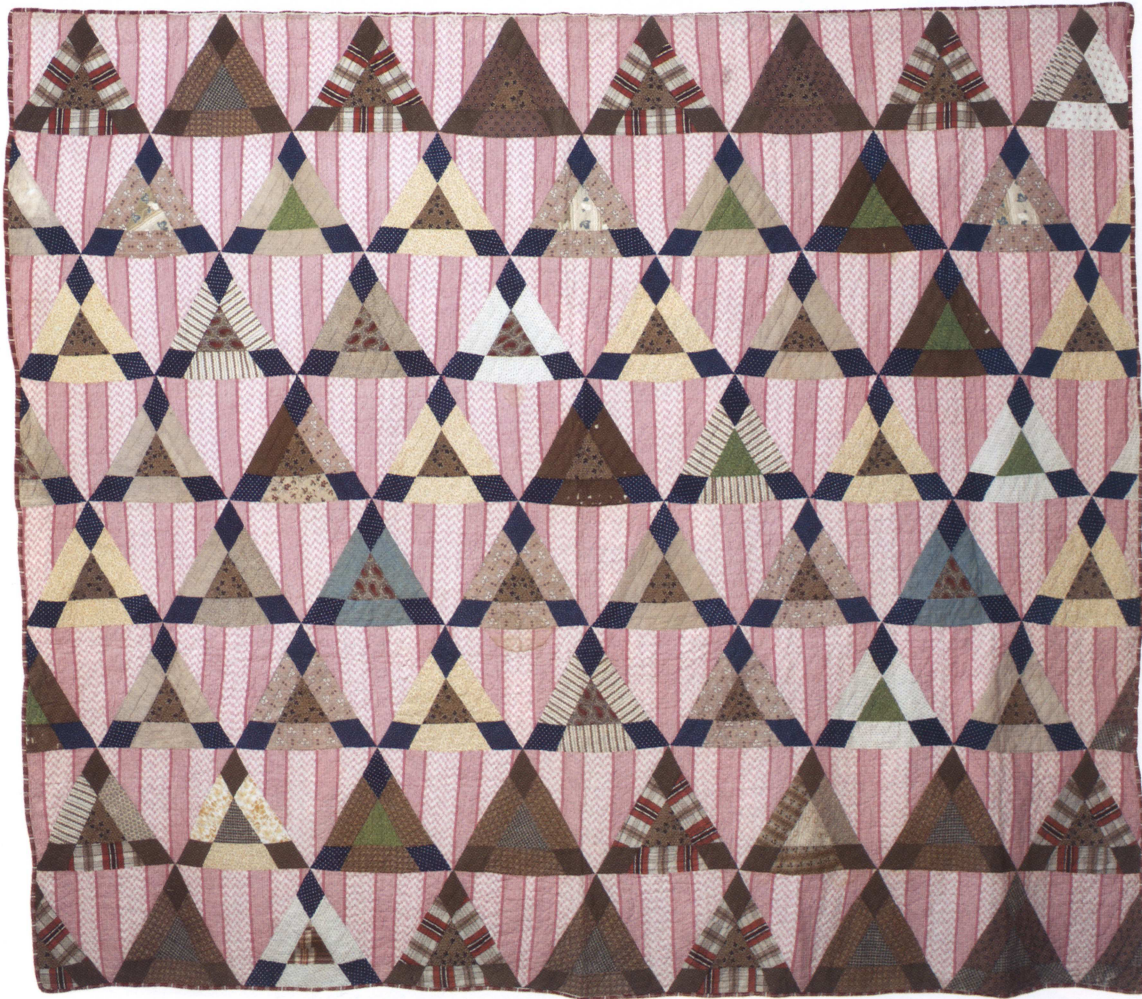
THE MOORES' DAUGHTER Mattie, a second-generation quilter, married fellow Linn Countian William Cornett in 1881. He was 11 years her senior.

About 15 years before William and Mattie married, he went West like many others from his county. He worked for 10 years as a wagon driver in California and another five years as a miner in Colorado. According to a master's thesis by Toni Prawl, MA '86, PhD '94, it's clear from William's letters to Mattie that the couple had sparked several years before he returned home for good. Prawl writes, "He purchased a ring for her



Sophia Root Moore made this twill weave blanket, far left, which might have been used between a quilt and sheet. By hand, she spun the yarn, and joined, hemmed and embroidered the blanket. She might have woven the fabric or hired out that task. Moore's daughter Mattie Cornett, left, carried on the family tradition of quilting.

Previous spread:
The Cornett children, from left, Winnie, Carl, Bracy and Josie, were raised on a Linneus, Mo., farm where quilting was part of family tradition for women.



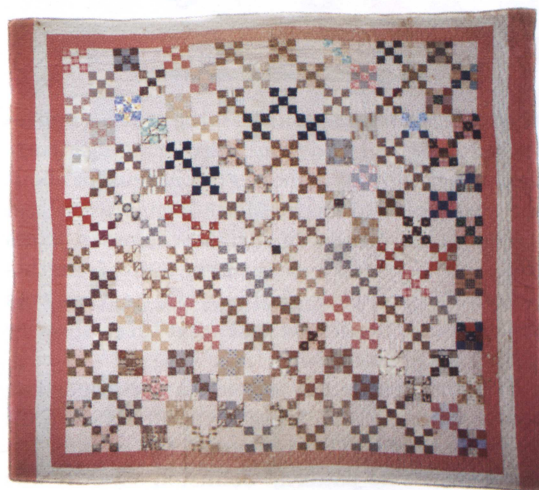
**TRIANGLE QUILT
CIRCA 1850**

This all-cotton quilt was pieced and quilted by hand, probably by Sophia Root Moore. The individual pieces, which might be a combination of homespun and ready-made fabric, include some traditional men's shirt patterns.

but made it clear that they were not engaged yet and offered her a final warning, 'I do remember our understanding, and as I told you, choose better if you can.' " During William's time in Colorado, his mining operations were only moderately successful, but he helped organize the town of Telluride and served as its county commissioner. William also explored the San Miguel Mountains, parts of which yet bear his name — Cornett Gulch, Cornett Creek and Cornett Falls.

William returned home in 1881 long enough to marry Mattie and move the couple to Hutchinson, Kan., where he was trying his hand at the cattle business. Soon they had a daughter, Buena Vista. But raising cattle wasn't panning out any better than mining. Mattie and Buena Vista returned home to Linneus while William arranged to sell the business. His letters to Mattie during this separation included detailed business reporting and sometimes ended in lovesick longing:

"... Mattie, I have a whole book full of little talk for you when I get home, but I haven't time to write it to you.



**NINE-SQUARE QUILT
1870-1930**

Mattie Cornett started this quilt as a young woman, but it was not completed for about 60 years. This hand- and machine-sewn textile includes fabrics from the 19th century, as well as from the 1910s and 1930s.

'God bless my wife and baby, and see me safely with them again and as soon as possible,' is my heavenly prayer.

*Goodbye, your loving husband,
W.L. Cornett*

A thousand kisses for you and baby."



CRAZY QUILT, CIRCA 1890

Buena Vista Cornett started this Crazy Quilt top pattern for practice. She died in 1891 at age 8. Her initials at the quilt top's center might have been added after her death by another family member.

BY THE TIME WILLIAM and Mattie set up a household in 1883, railroads had been bringing ready-made wool and cotton fabrics to Linneus for about 20 years, Johnston says. Mattie's generation had access to more fabrics and brighter colors in prints and designs, which appear in her quilts from this period. Still, sewing clothing and textiles was an important household task, and these showier quilts earned their keep.

The girls learned to sew at an early age. The textile collection includes an unfinished quilt by Buena Vista. "This is called a Crazy Quilt because there's no pattern," Johnston says. "It was a way to use a lot of old clothes and textiles. She was just learning." She dipped into scraps of her grandmother's homespun fabrics, as well as other bits of velvet and silk. In 1891 at age 8, long before the days of antibiotics, Buena Vista died of scarlet fever. The family kept her unfinished quilt, now more than a century old.

TWO OF BUENA VISTA'S younger sisters, Bracy and Winnie, lived into their 80s and produced several decorative quilts that have little in common with the homespun workhorse textiles Sophia sewed when Linneus was a frontier town.

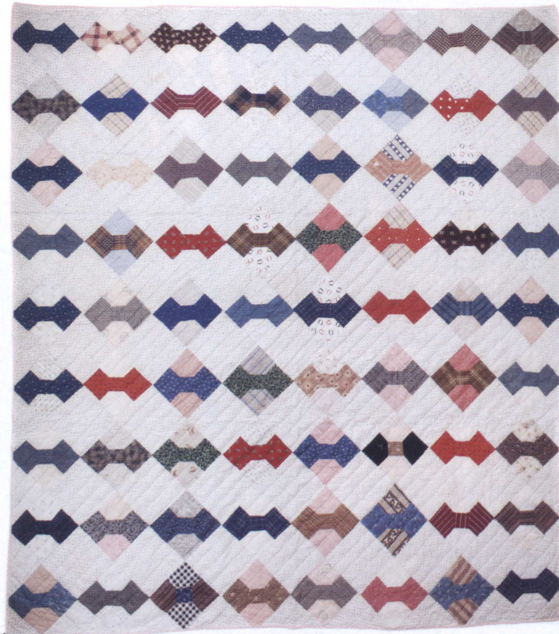
The sisters were well-educated, well-traveled teachers who remained single. They attended the Moore school, went on to the First District Normal School in Kirksville, Mo., and took a chemistry course together at MU in the summer of 1913. As young teachers, both worked in Linn County schools.

Winnie used her professional skills as a sort of ticket across the Western United States. She taught in Iowa, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Colorado and Arizona before earning a bachelor's degree in education from Colorado State Teachers College at Greeley. She returned to Missouri where she taught at Benton High School in St. Joseph, but soon moved on to a high school in Waukegan, Ill.,



UTILITY QUILT. CIRCA 1896

Newspaper clippings, some covering William McKinley's run for president in 1896, are stuffed into the quilt's corners to lend weight and shape. The textile's rough-and-ready fabrics and construction suggest it was not used atop a bed but perhaps in or below a mattress.



**BOW TIE QUILT
CIRCA 1930**

This common pattern from the 1930s includes some men's shirting. It is quilted in a diagonal pattern.

for 16 years. She taught business-related classes, a subject her father thought unsuitable for a woman. A relative of Winnie said, "She chose the life, as we say, of an old-maid school teacher."

Bracy, the more outgoing of the sisters, was one of the first teachers in rural Linn County to include art in the curriculum. In 1926 at age 41, she took a year off to earn a master's degree from Columbia University in New York. She settled in and taught art for 24 years at Northeast Missouri State Teachers College in Kirksville. "Addressed as 'Miss Cornett,' Bracy lived in an apartment that she frequently shared with students. She encouraged many students to continue their programs as she provided rent-free housing for them," Prawl writes.

In the meantime, William passed away in 1929, and Mattie's health deteriorated. Winnie moved back home in 1939 to care for Mattie, who died three years later. Bracy moved home in 1949. The sisters helped their brother, Carl, who had remained in Linneus, run the farm.



**GRANDMOTHER'S FLOWER GARDEN QUILT
CIRCA 1930**

Bracy or Winnie Cornett probably made this color-coordinated quilt of solids and prints using fabrics purchased for this purpose — a far cry from the use of old work clothes in earlier quilts. It might have been pieced by machine and then quilted by hand.

THE THIRD-GENERATION QUILTS that Bracy and Winnie sewed are clearly the most sophisticated in the collection, Johnston says. Not only had the sisters seen something of the world, but the world had also come to Linneus. By then, newspapers were printing full-size patterns that quilters could use time and again.

"The later quilts showed they had access to more colors and more intricate patterns in manufactured fabrics," Johnston says. "They sewed for leisure. They didn't have to spend time spinning and weaving, and so they had time to lavish on

fancier quilting techniques.

"But these pieces were hand-sewn down the generations. The women of this family preserved their quilting tradition because they believed it was important. You can see it in their work." **M**