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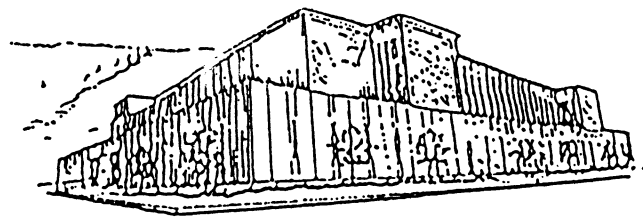
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THE FABRICATION AND FUNCTION OF  
STAR QUILTS  
ON FORT PECK RESERVATION IN NORTHEASTERN MONTANA

by

Kim Elise Taylor

B.F.A., B.A. The University of Montana, 1987

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

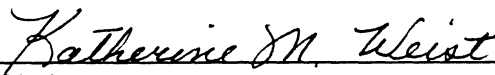
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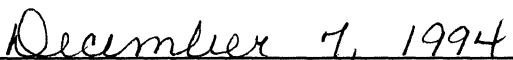
The University of Montana

1994

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Taylor, Kim E., M.A., November 1994

Anthropology

The Fabrication And Function of Star Quilts On Fort Peck Reservation in Northeastern Montana (99 pp.)

Director Katherine M. Weist: *KMW*

The star quilt is a contemporary symbol of ethnic identity for the Sioux and Assiniboine Indians living in the Plains states. The aim of my research is to trace the development of the star quilt as a Native American expression and to discuss how it is made and what purpose it serves on Fort Peck Reservation in northeastern Montana. The data for the historical research was obtained through library resources and Instructional Media Services of the University of Montana. The information for the main body of this thesis came from recorded oral interviews with star quilters from Wolf Point, Brockton, and Fort Kipp, Montana on Fort Peck Reservation during July, 1992.

After several interviews, I noticed that there were two different kinds of star quilts on the reservation; those made for giveaway ceremonies, and those made for other reasons. I attended an afternoon of giveaway ceremonies during the Iron Ring Festival in Poplar, Montana, while taking notes of my observations. Within this study, the function and fabrication of giveaway star quilts are compared and contrasted to non-giveaway star quilts.

Missionaries taught quilting skills to the Native Americans in the latter part of the nineteenth century. This coincided with the demise of the buffalo, so quilts eventually replaced buffalo robes.

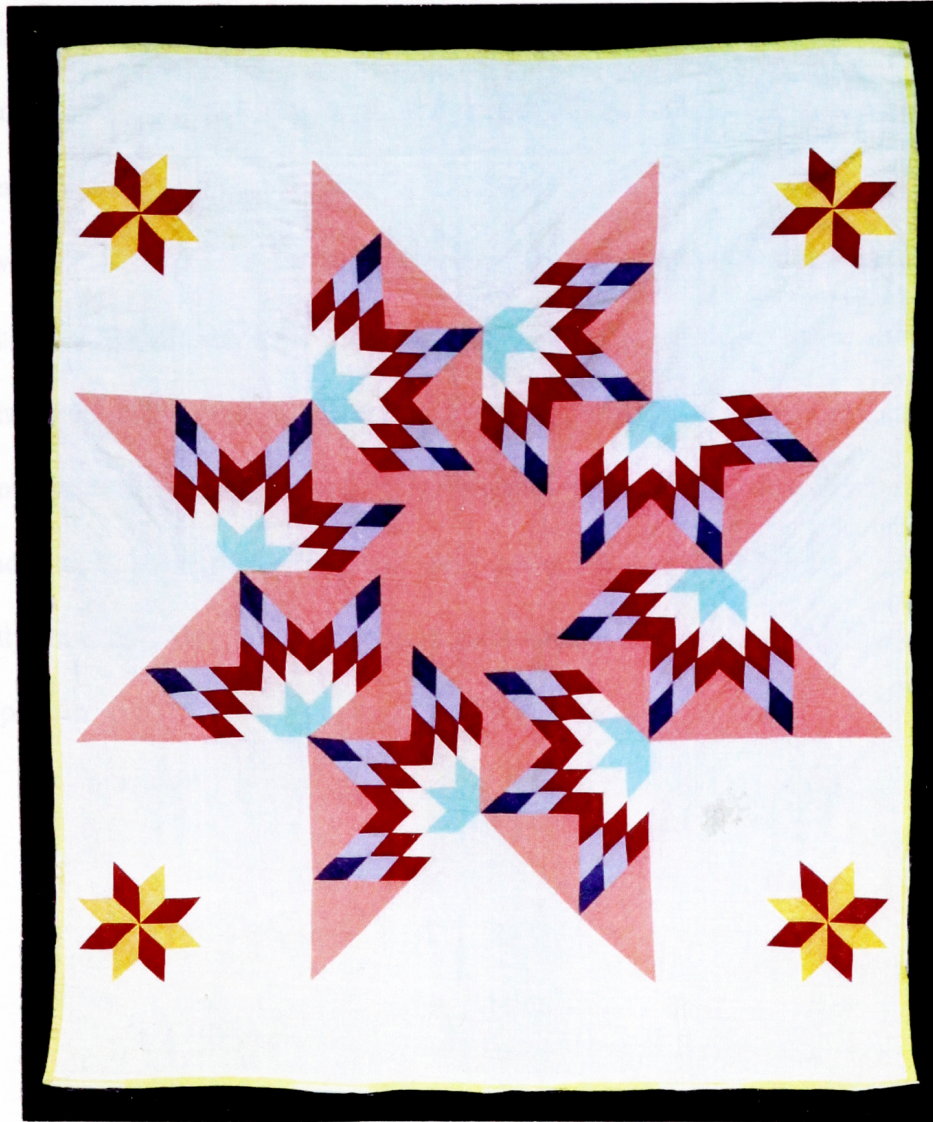
The Sioux of South Dakota initially adopted the patchwork star pattern for their quilts at the turn of the century. By the 1920's, the Sioux on Fort Peck Reservation were making star quilts as well.

Today there is a star quilt industry on Fort Peck Reservation. Hundreds of quilts are given away at ceremonies and events throughout the year. The demand for quilts is so great that many women learn to quilt so they can fulfill their family's obligation for star quilts. Other women make a living sewing giveaway quilts for others.

The star quilt is no longer made and used by only the Sioux and Assiniboine. It is becoming a symbol of ethnic identity for all Native Americans. Star quilts are raffled off at pow-wows throughout the state of Montana and seen as backdrops at Native American events and on floats in parades.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank and express appreciation to everyone who has helped me with this thesis, especially: the quilters on Fort Peck Reservation for sharing their time



**Figure 1** Sparrows in Flight. Fort Peck Reservation. Quilter unknown.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank and express appreciation to everyone who has helped me with this thesis, especially; the quilters on Fort Peck Reservation for sharing their time and stories with me; my husband, Alain Deroulette, for providing photographs as well as financial and moral support for my project; Claire Rhein for suggesting Native American star quilts as a subject for my thesis; Professors Katherine Weist, Richard Clow, and Thomas Foor for their generous assistance, good advise and invaluable criticism; Joyce Brusin for taking care of my infant daughter Margot during my fieldwork; Fatah Boualamallah for making the drawings for me; The Matthew Hansen Endowment Committee for providing financial assistance for my fieldwork; my dear friend Kathleen Eyre for her unwavering moral support from beginning to end; and finally, everyone else who has helped me in some way to bring this thesis to completion.



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## INTRODUCTION

The star quilt as a Native American artistic expression first came to my attention when the Reverend Jesse Jackson came to the University of Montana in April 1987. He was presented with a star quilt from the Sioux-Assiniboine tribes (Montana Kaimin, Apr.14, 1987:1). The next formal presentation of a star quilt at the University of Montana that I was aware of was during the spring 1991 when the president of the University, George Dennison, received one from the Blackfeet tribe. Dennison was honored in this way "for his work in promoting educational opportunities for Montana Native Americans" (Montanan, Fall 1991:7). These two incidents piqued my interest in star quilts and the contemporary Native American tradition of giving to honor individuals.

Tribal use of fabric to manufacture these quilts coincided with my own interest in textiles. I became interested in fabrics when I learned to sew at the age of twelve. Soon thereafter I was making most of my own clothes, and doing embroidery and quilting as well. I learned to sew at a young age, as do many of the women on the Fort Peck Reservation where there is a high demand for quilts. Women's labor has always played a significant part in the traditional Plain's Indian way of life, and today, on reservations in Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota, women are busy making star quilts primarily for traditional giveaway ceremonies. In effect, the quilter's efforts are contributing to the perpetuation of this tradition. That observation sets the boundaries for this study, which is an examination of the symbolic, economic, social and political importance of star quilts on Fort Peck Reservation in northeastern Montana.

The Sioux reservations, throughout North and South Dakota, as well as parts of Minnesota, Nebraska and Montana, are the heart of star quilt making country. My resources were limited, making it impossible to undertake field research on all the reservations. Therefore, I focused my research to quilters on the Fort Peck Reservation in northeastern Montana. I received an award from the Matthew Hansen Endowment in June, 1992, which covered my travel and living expenses for two weeks on the reservation.

Piles of goods are distributed in formal giveaway ceremonies that occur throughout the year on Fort Peck Reservation. The most valued objects in a giveaway pile are the star quilts, with as many as twenty needed for one giveaway. Most giveaways are held during the summer powwow season and the winter basketball season. Consequently, the quilters are busiest at those times of the year. Some quilters make as many as one hundred star quilts in a year for various giveaways. What had initially impressed me as an occasional gift giving ritual among the Indians in western Montana, turned out to be a veritable star quilt cottage industry among the Sioux and Assiniboine on the Fort Peck Reservation.

Throughout this paper I use the collective term "Sioux" to refer to the Yantonai, Santee, and Teton bands that reside on Fort Peck Reservation. An exception to this is when I am referring to a particular band in the history section. I found that they refer to themselves as "Sioux" on the reservation. This is probably to differentiate themselves from the Fort Peck Assiniboine tribe and not so much between each other.

## Literature

The available literature on the subject of Native American star quilts is scarce and incomplete. I hope to remedy part of this problem with my research on Fort Peck Reservation.

Others whose work preceded mine provided some guidance. The work of Jane Schneider covers textiles from different cultures throughout the world, though nothing specifically about star quilts. Even so, her theories pertaining to the social significance of cloth proved to be valuable in my examination of Native American star quilts. In one of her articles, titled "The Anthropology of Cloth" (1987:409-448), Schneider reviews "the role of cloth consumption in the consolidation of social relations and in the expression of social identities and values" (1987:409). In this same article, she establishes a cause and effect relationship between the production of cloth and the use of power within a society, in such forms as class structure, religious institutions and ethnic communities.

Schneider also created a conference with Annette B. Weiner in 1983 titled "Cloth and the Organization of Human Experience". Selected papers from this conference became the material for the book Cloth And Human Experience, published in 1989 and edited by Schneider and Weiner. The aim of the conference was to:

- 1). document the significance of cloth traditions in the historical development of the world's societies and to make the case that these traditions are as central as agricultural production to social and evolutionary theory.
- 2). bring together areas of inquiry in the social sciences and the humanities that have grown apart, in particular, materialist and idealist modes of interpretation, museum collections and

ethnographic research, aesthetics and the labor process  
(Schneider & Weiner 1986: 178).

Scholars from the fields of anthropology, art, and history participated in this conference attempting to reach a summary on the social, economic, ceremonial, symbolic and political importance of cloth worldwide. The star quilt has meaning for the Assiniboine and Sioux in all of these realms as well, which I will address in the main body of this thesis.

The brief history of the star quilt and a description of its use is provided by Marla N. Powers in her 1982 Ph.D. dissertation Oglala Women in Myth, Ritual, and Reality. Powers conducted research with the Oglala women on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota for thirty years. During this time period, she saw a preference for Victorian style crazy quilts on the reservation replaced by "an increasing trend toward producing star quilts" (Powers 1982:194). The same transition also took place on Fort Peck Reservation. A quilter I interviewed named Rita Belgarde made crazy quilts from odd shaped pieces of fabric scraps fifty years ago. More recently, she made crazy patchwork star quilts using fabric scraps. Now she almost exclusively makes star quilts in the style of the "Lone Star" patchwork pattern using small diamond shaped pieces cut from store bought material.

Impressed by the quilters, Powers organized "A Century of Vision", an exhibition of Lakota star quilts in 1990. The function of star quilts on Sioux reservations in South Dakota is described in the exhibition catalog. In reference to the star pattern, Powers concludes that the "Lakota women work to construct quilts with this particular design motif" which is "consciously constructed to symbolize

contemporary Lakota culture, a way of life seen as being different from mainstream America" (1990:1).

Like Powers, Marsha Clift Bol focuses her research on Lakota women in her article, "Lakota Women's Artistic Strategies in Support of the Social System". Women's labor, in the form of art, was important in the maintenance of traditional culture before and during the early reservation period. "In essence, women's art supported and maintained the basic values of traditional Lakota society" (Bol 1985:39). As a result, the most elaborate beadwork in Lakota history came about at the end of the nineteenth century during a time of great cultural upheaval. Warfare, hunting and indigenous religion were replaced with attempts at farming, rations and Christianity. The women were less affected by these changes than the men because the duties of housekeeping and child rearing remained much the same as before. Acting as keepers of the traditional culture, Lakota women responded by doing elaborate beadwork at this time. Some garments for family members were completely beaded, such as a dress for a young girl, the uppers and soles of a pair of moccasins, or a man's vest. According to Bol:

Lakota costume assumed the task of reaffirming and maintaining Lakota identity in the midst of tremendous stress. Proliferation and intensification of its elaboration only enhanced the costume's potential for defining and protecting the ethnic boundaries of the Lakota from encroachment by the outside world (1985:50).

The importance of the star quilt in a ceremonial context is addressed in the paper "The Role of Sioux Women in the Production of Ceremonial Objects: The Case of the Star Quilt" by Patricia Albers and Beatrice Medicine. This article appears in



The Hidden Half: Studies Of Plains Indian Women (1983) also edited by Medicine and Albers. After the buffalo were drastically reduced in number, star quilts replaced buffalo robes in traditional ceremonies, such as giveaways, funerals, and Yuwipi rituals.

The research of Nancy H. Tucker and Jeanne O. Eder on the Fort Peck Reservation in 1986 resulted in the slide show "My Grandmother's Star Quilt Honors Me". The historical development of the star quilt on Fort Peck Reservation is followed in the narrative, which illustrates its growing value in giveaway ceremonies. Formal qualities of contemporary star quilts are detailed and compared to star quilts made off the reservation. According to Tucker and Eder, most Indian quilters on the reservation use bright, bold solid colors to make the patchwork star blanket using fan shaped quilting stitches. Non-Indian quilters use calico printed fabrics and quilt around the star with various quilting stitches used in the background. I found their observations pertaining to the star quilts on Fort Peck Reservation to be true except for the distinction between Indian and non-Indian. It would be more accurate to compare the quilting techniques of the quilters involved in the giveaway tradition to the quilters not involved in the giveaway tradition. Not all Indians on Fort Peck Reservation are involved in the giveaway tradition.

I garnered the meaning and importance of the star symbol from various sources, including the work of Clark Wissler. Designs characterized as having protective powers, such as for shields or Ghost Dance clothing, are described and explained in his article "Some Protective Designs of the Dakota" (1907). Wissler

believed that "the protective designs used in the ghost-dance were essentially the same as those used in former times upon shields and other objects" (1907:39).

Theresa Eppridge relates certain star designs to specific myths in her paper "The Star Image and Plains Indian Star Legends" (1980). Eppridge also notes the importance of star motifs in the decoration of Ghost Dance clothing in the early 1890s. Visions, received during trance-like states while dancing, "inspired the decoration of men's shirts and women's dresses with eagles, crows, dragonflies, pipes, moons and star, as well as personal symbols" (Eppridge 1983:44).

Physician James R. Walker collected and recorded Oglala myths during his stay on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota from 1896-1914. Oglala leaders Little Wound, American Horse, and Lone Star instructed Walker in Lakota belief and ceremony so that Walker would "know how to be the medicine man for the people..." (Walker 1980:68).

The evolution of traditional Sioux design and decoration, including stars, was described by Carrie A. Lyford in her publication Quill And Beadwork Of The Western Sioux (1940). Contact between other Indians and later the Whites resulted in a "frequent change of materials and, with each change an adaptation of design" (Lyford 1940:66).

Star quilts are most often distributed at giveaway ceremonies on Fort Peck Reservation. Katherine M. Weist describes giveaways and analyzes their function in modern Northern Cheyenne society in her article "Giving Away: The Ceremonial Distribution of Goods Among the Northern Cheyenne of Southeastern Montana"

(1973). According to Weist, the purpose for having a giveaway is to gain prestige within the community and to "display love for one's kinsmen, particularly one's children" (1973:97).

Elizabeth S. Grobsmith examines the economic and social functions of the giveaway tradition in contemporary Lakota society in her paper "The Lakota Giveaway: A System of Social Reciprocity" (1979). The giveaway serves to prevent "uneven accumulation of wealth and the subsequent development of class strata" (1979:123). Alliances are made through gift-giving, resulting in extended social support systems. The transformation of the giveaway as an economic institution to a social event is detailed in Grobsmith's article "The Changing Role of the Giveaway Ceremony in Contemporary Lakota Life" (1981). The purpose of giveaways is no longer to redistribute wealth, though there is still economic advantage and security in extending social ties. The giveaway today "has become increasingly a significant marker of Indian identity by separating those who observe native tradition from those who do not" (Grobsmith 1981:78).

The focus for this paper is the function of star quilts on the Fort Peck Reservation within the context of the giveaway. Two different quilting traditions, those involved in giveaways and those not involved in giveaways, will be compared and contrasted. This will explain how almost identical products (in the form of star quilts) have different meanings depending on their intended purpose. A giveaway quilt is tribal art, produced by tribal members for tribal members. A non-giveaway quilt is ethnic art, done in the Indian style for an outside market.

## Methodology

Most of the fieldwork for this thesis was done during July, 1992. At that time, I interviewed eight quilters on the Fort Peck Reservation, six of whom were currently involved in the giveaway tradition. I prepared a list of questions ahead of time which I referred to during the course of an interview. Seven of these interviews were recorded on tape and can be obtained from the oral history collection in the University of Montana Archives. In addition, I interviewed Cherry Jacobson, quilter and owner of Country Friends Quilt Shop in Missoula, during a star quilt exhibit in August, 1993.

During an afternoon of giveaway ceremonies at the Iron Ring Celebration in Poplar, Montana, July 19, 1992, I recorded personal observations while Alain Deroulette took photographs. Alain Deroulette also photographed a giveaway during the girls' basketball tournament between Brockton and Culbertson, in Culbertson, Montana, November, 1992. Henry Robert traveled with Alain and took notes of the ceremony according to my instructions.

Primary sources used in this research include oral histories of star quilters on Fort Peck Reservation. In addition, I found pertinent information in government reports from the U.S. Census, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Ethnology, and Indians At Work. Writings from the field work of Marilyn Powers, David Reed Miller, and James Walker also proved to be helpful. Various secondary sources, in the form of books and articles, provided the remainder of the information for this thesis. Most materials came from the library collection or Inter-library loan at the University of Montana, Mansfield Library. A few books came from my own collection, or the

personal collection of others.

Chapter II of this study begins with a brief geographical description of the Fort Peck Reservation in northeastern Montana. This is followed with an historical background of the Sioux and the Assiniboine Indians, as well as the history of the development of the Fort Peck Reservation.

Chapter III describes the traditional role of women in Plains Indian culture with focus on the arts. Quilting was introduced by missionary women and soon thereafter adopted into the native culture as buffalo robes and even cow hides became scarce. Presently, the star motif is the preferred patchwork pattern. I trace the importance of the star symbol to traditional protective designs and mythology in Chapter IV.

Chapter V is the main body of this thesis and consists of my findings and excerpts from the interviews with the quilters on Fort Peck Reservation. Quilting styles and construction techniques are examined, as are the reasons for quilting. Differences are noted between two distinct groups of quilters; those who are involved in the giveaway tradition, and those who are not involved in the giveaway tradition. I compare and contrast the style of giveaway and non-giveaway star quilts.

In my last chapter, the giveaway tradition is described in past and present forms, which in turn accounts for the large demand for quilts on the reservation. The giveaway tradition also explains why star quilts are considered tribal art. Whether for a memorial celebration, or a basketball tournament game, a giveaway is a cultural expression of great significance for the Sioux and Assiniboine of the Fort Peck Reservation today.

## FORT PECK RESERVATION

### Geography

Established by Congress in 1888, the Fort Peck Reservation is in the northeastern corner of Montana. Bordered on the south by the Missouri River and intersected by several of its tributaries, the reservation is approximately 40 miles wide and 80 miles long. Rolling hills of prairie grasses comprise most of the reservation, with noncommercial timber found in the river bottoms. Farming is possible on the flats and gentle slopes, where wheat, barley, and safflower oil are cultivated on roughly half the land. The elevation ranges between 1900 and 3100 feet.

The climate is dry in the Fort Peck area with less than thirteen inches of rainfall a year. Summers are warm and sunny with late afternoon and evening thunder showers in the months of June and July common. Winters are usually cold, with at least one severe cold spell that lasts several days. The temperature falls below zero almost fifty percent of the time during the winter months (Overall Economic Development Plan 1969:17). There is light snowfall in the winter and humidity is low year round.

During the early reservation days, tribally owned land was divided up into individual parcels of 320 acres and each Indian received a parcel. After allotment, the reservation was opened to outside homesteading in 1907. The surplus non-allotted lands were then sold to non-Indians. As a result, one half of the more than two million acres that comprises the reservation, including the most fertile land, now belongs to the whites (Overall Economic Development Plan 1969:38). The remaining

half of the reservation is Indian owned, most of which consists of grazing and dry farm land. Ten percent of the reservation is tribally owned (Overall Economic Development Plan 1969:19). The land loss continues today. Almost seven thousand acres of Indian land is sold to non-Indians each year on Fort Peck Reservation (Broomfield 1976:5). The individuals selling the land are so poor that sometimes it is their only means of survival and the tribe cannot afford to buy the land when it is offered for sale due to a lack of money.

Fifty-four percent of the 10,722 people living on the reservation are American Indian (1990 Census Of Population And Housing, Profile 1). Approximately fifty-six percent of the enrolled tribal members are Sioux, thirty-one percent are Assiniboine and the rest are a combination of the two. There are a few Cree and Turtle Mountain Chippewa who are enrolled at other reservations but live on Fort Peck Reservation.

The towns of Wolf Point and Poplar are the largest population centers which are situated on the southern edge of the reservation along U.S. Highway No. 2. Poplar, with a population of 4,300, is home to the headquarters for the Assiniboine and Sioux tribes, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and Indian Health Service, all of which provide much needed but limited employment opportunities to the area. Other important sources of tribal employment on the reservation are found in the public school system, oil fields, retail businesses, and farming and ranching. Despite employment opportunities, unemployment is high. Almost thirty percent of the overall Indian population is unemployed, compared to sixteen percent of the white population (1990 Census Of Population And Housing, Profile 14). Approximately thirty-seven

percent of the male Indian population on the reservation is unemployed (1990 Census Of Population And Housing, Profile 14).

### **The People**

Even though they were enemies for more than 200 years, the Assiniboine and Sioux Indian tribes now share Fort Peck Reservation in northeastern Montana. The Sioux live predominately on the eastern part of the reservation in the towns of Poplar, Brockton, and Fort Kipp, while the Assiniboine live on the west end of the reservation in Wolf Point, Oswego, and Fraser. The Assiniboine also live in Canada, and on the Fort Belknap Reservation with the Gros Ventre Indian tribe, 130 miles to the west of Fort Peck Reservation. In addition to Fort Peck, the Sioux live on reservations in Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and in Canada.

### **The Sioux**

This unlikely pairing of Indian tribes on Fort Peck Reservation is a result of scattered bands of Yanktonai, and later Santee Sioux, moving into the Milk River area during the 1860s and 1870s. In an effort to evade government troops and in search of dwindling buffalo herds, the Sioux lined up to receive annuities at the government agencies in Montana.

The Sioux name is derived from the Chippewa word Nadowe-is-iw. Coming from a traditional enemy, the term is a derogatory one that means "snakes" or "enemies". The French traders spelled the word Naduessioux, which was soon shortened to Sioux. Today, this is the official name used by the United States Government and the one that they themselves use when speaking English. In their



own language, depending on which dialect they speak, they refer to themselves as Dakota, Lakota, or Nakota, which means "allies".

The Sioux first came onto the Northern Plains in the middle of the eighteenth century. Before this time, they lived between the upper Minnesota and Missouri Rivers in the present day states of North Dakota, South Dakota and Minnesota. The Chippewa, armed with guns obtained from French traders in Canada, slowly drove the Sioux westward, who in turn displaced the smallpox decimated Arikara. Over a span of fifty years, the Sioux moved onto the Plains where they experienced a change from a woodlands culture to a buffalo hunting culture (Hassrick 1964:64). They obtained horses and firearms during this same time period and became "the most powerful group in the northern Plains" (Zimmerman 1985:129).

By the early nineteenth century, the Sioux were very good buffalo hunters. Their territory and cultural development expanded with the abundance of food and the means to defend themselves. In 1833, the trader Edwin Thompson Denig who was at Fort Union estimated a little less than 12,000 people in the "Sioux nation residing on the Missouri and its tributaries and trading there" (Denig 1961:14).

The fall months were spent hunting and preparing meat for the winter. Constantly on the move, the Sioux hunted buffalo ranging over most of what is now South Dakota, North Dakota and Minnesota, including parts of Montana, Wyoming, Nebraska, Iowa, and Wisconsin. Portable buffalo skin tipis replaced bark covered shelters dug into the ground. Tipis could be broken down quickly and were easily moved on horseback.

Before moving on to the Plains, the Sioux were divided into seven bands. These consisted of the Mdeqakanton (Spirit Lake People), the Wahpekute (Shooters among the Leaves), the Sisseton (People of the Boggy Ground), the Wahpeton (Dwellers among the Leaves), the Yankton (Dwellers at the End), the Yanktonai (Little Dwellers at the End), and the Teton (Dwellers on the Plains) (Hassrick 1964:3). Depending on which dialect was spoken, three divisions developed from these seven bands as they moved west. The Mdeqakanton, Wahpekute, Sisseton and Wahpeton bands became known as the Santee or First Division (Dakota dialect). The Yankton and Yanktonai bands became the Middle Division (Nakota dialect). The Teton band became the third division (Lakota dialect) which was made up of seven groups; the Brule, Oglala, Miniconjou, Blackfeet, Two Kettle, Huncpapa, and Sans Arc (Woolworth & Champe 1974:7).

### **The Assiniboine**

The Assiniboine are related to the Sioux and speak the same language with only minor differences in dialect. Their name comes from the Algonquian word Ass-ni-pwan, which means "Stone Sioux". This is in reference to their method of boiling meat in hide bags using hot stones (Kennedy 1965:48).

No longer a part of the Sioux proper, the Assiniboine nevertheless refer to themselves as Nakota. The Sioux refer to them as the HoHe, or "rebels", because they joined the Chippewa and Cree tribes in warring against the Sioux. The Assiniboine are believed to have broken off from the Yanktonai band of the Sioux in the middle of the 17th century, shortly before any contact with the whites. Robert Lowie bases

this on linguistic evidence, such as the "similarity of Assiniboine to the other Dakota dialects" (1909:8). According to tribal stories, the split was a result of a "quarrel between two young chiefs over a young woman" (Robinson, 1904:25).

On the other hand, the Assiniboine were on friendly terms with their Cree neighbors, to the point that they often intermarried. Unlike the Sioux at that time, the Cree had access to guns and European goods through contact with the English on Hudson's Bay. The Cree then supplied these items to their nearest neighbors, the Assiniboine (Le Sueur 1902:190). The tradition of strong kinship ties did not prevent the Assiniboine from siding with the Cree against the Sioux for material reasons.

The Assiniboine were mobile people, moving from resource to resource within their territory. They lived in tipis and subsisted on the buffalo, as did the Sioux. Like their Cree neighbors, Assiniboine hunters were masters of the buffalo pound. "Buffalo were driven into an enclosure, usually circular in form. Once in the pound, the animals were slaughtered and few if any were able to escape" (Miller 1987:57).

Unlike other Plains tribes, the Assiniboine continued to rely on dogs as beasts of burden long after the arrival of the horse. "Each family had from six to twelve dogs, which could carry from thirty to fifty pounds apiece" (Lowie 1909:15). The dog, attached to a travois, dragged possessions from one camp to the next. When food was scarce, dogs were eaten, as were horses, though the Assiniboine had fewer horses than most Plains tribes.

The Assiniboine were a dominant tribe of the southern plains of Canada before the smallpox epidemic of 1780 significantly reduced their numbers. They extended

their territory down from Canada and began living in the northeastern corner of present day Montana by the beginning of the 18th century. During a voyage in the Upper Missouri territory in 1830, Maximilian observed that the Assiniboine were living alongside their Cree allies between the Saskatchewan, the Assiniboine, and the Missouri Rivers (Thwaites 1906:14). The Assiniboine numbered approximately 1,200 lodges, averaging six to a lodge, at the time of the founding of Fort Union in 1829 (Dougherty 1957:52). Smallpox decimated the Assiniboine population, reducing them to less than one third of that size eight years later in 1837. Earlier outbreaks had ravaged the Assiniboine as well, but not to the extent as the epidemic of 1837.

The Assiniboine warred against the Blackfeet and the Gros Ventre to the west, and Sioux to the south. They never took up arms against the United States government, as did their more notorious and aggressive cousins, the Sioux. Though different in this respect, the Assiniboine and Sioux were similar in their hunting lifestyles, traditions and beliefs.

The Assiniboine in Montana split into two different factions, known as the Upper Assiniboine and the Lower Assiniboine, in 1869 after approximately one hundred Assiniboine women of the upper band married Gros Ventre warriors (CIA AR 1870:664). Even though the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre were traditional enemies, they joined together for protection against other warring tribes after smallpox epidemics drastically reduced the size of both tribes. The Lower Assiniboine intermarried with Yanktonai for the same reason. The other Sioux groups bothered the Lower Assiniboine less as a result of their alliance with the Yanktonai. The Upper

Assiniboine continued to attack the Sioux while the Lower Assiniboine continued to attack the Gros Ventre (Miller 1987:105-106). This precipitated the split among the Assiniboine whereby one half ended up on Fort Peck Reservation with the Sioux, and the other half ended up on Fort Belknap Reservation with the Gros Ventre.

### **White Contact**

The first recorded visit of a white man in Sioux country was in 1650 by a French man named Nicholas Perrot (Hyde 1937:4). This visit was soon followed by other French traders wanting to do business with the Sioux. With the traders, came Catholic missionaries who attempted to convert the Indians to Catholicism. From this point on, the Sioux had continual contact with white men and their trade goods, which became an integral part of Sioux culture.

Both the Assiniboine and the Cree were trading with the French during the first part of the 17th century in the Lake Winnipeg region in what is present day Manitoba (Sharrock 1974:103). The English became trading partners with the Cree and Assiniboine by 1670, when the Hudson's Bay trading post was established. Both the French and English traders brought the Indians kettles, metal tools, guns, and ammunition in exchange for animal pelts, preferably beaver. Beaver fur hats were in high fashion at the time in Europe.

Traders moved up along the upper Missouri by the end of the 18th century. During the time of the Lewis and Clark expedition (1804-06), the British were trading small kegs of rum for Assiniboine pemmican (Lewis and Clark 1987:34). The Assiniboine had a reputation for making fine pemmican, which was a basic provision

for the traders in their long journeys across country.

After the Lewis and Clark expedition, the American fur companies followed and established themselves in Sioux and Assiniboine country. Marriage between Sioux and Assiniboine women and French traders and trappers became common practice as alliances were made for purposes of trade. Buffalo robes and pemmican made up the bulk of what the Assiniboine offered in trade after the demand for beaver fur drastically declined in 1832 due to a change in hat fashion. The Sioux traded primarily buffalo robes which were "the standard of value for the American Fur Company from 1833-1859" (Dougherty 1957:111). These robes were then sent east where they were fashioned into heavy overcoats and used for sleigh and carriage robes (Ewers 1958:69).

### **Treaties**

Gold in California brought a steady stream of white prospectors through Sioux Country beginning in 1849. More than 50,000 gold seekers passed through the area in 1850 (Olson 1965:5-6). This traffic disturbed the buffalo herds, and it didn't take long for the Sioux to resent the intrusion. The white emigrants also brought cholera, smallpox, and measles with them, which resulted in continual widespread epidemics among the native population. A heavy death toll embittered the Indians against the intruders.

The United States government attempted to secure safe passage for whites along the California trail with a series of treaties in 1851. The results of the treaties held at Traverse des Sioux and Mendota was that four eastern Sioux tribes sold their

lands in Minnesota and Iowa and agreed to settle on two reservations next to the Minnesota River (Woolworth & Champe 1974:157). A portion of the price to be paid to the Indians was set aside by the government to reimburse the traders for debts incurred by the Sioux.

The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 established boundaries between northern Plains tribes in an effort to eliminate territorial disputes between tribes and gain tribal permission for the United States government to create roads and build military posts in Indian territory. In exchange, the United States Government agreed to pay annuities to the Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Crow, Assiniboine, Gros Ventre, Mandan, and Arikara tribes for ten years (Newell 1981:2). Following the treaty, the Assiniboine began to frequent Fort Union, near the present day border of Montana and North Dakota, to receive their guaranteed treaty goods.

The Judith River Treaty in 1855 established much of Assiniboine territory in what is now Montana as hunting grounds for the Blackfeet and Gros Ventre, though it was agreed that the Assiniboine could continue to hunt on this land. Blackfeet territory was designated as:

commencing at the mouth of the Muscle-shell river; thence up the Missouri river to its source; thence along the main ridge of the Rocky Mountains, in a southerly direction, to the head waters of the northern source of the Yellowstone river; thence down the Yellowstone river to the mouth of Twenty-five Yard Creek; thence across to the head waters of the Muscle-shell River; thence down the Muscle-shell river to place of beginning (Royce 1899:786).

The Assiniboine had the right to hunt between the Milk and Missouri Rivers, around present day Havre, Montana.

Treaty making continued east of the lands discussed in the Judith River Treaty of 1855. In 1858, eastern Sioux bands near the seat of white settlement signed treaties whereby they agreed to land allotments. Goods and government services were offered in exchange for the lands surrendered. The traders kept some of the money from the land deal to pay off debts incurred by the Indians. Resentment among the Sioux mounted because of bad land deals, hunger waiting for government annuities, and the encroachment of the whites. The raging U.S. Civil War added to the problem by casting doubts on the authority of the United States government.

The Minnesota Outbreak began the summer of 1862 when white settlers and traders were massacred by angry Sioux. Santee refugees fleeing the conflict began heading west from Minnesota and settling in the Milk River area of Montana. Three years later the troubles in Minnesota ended when an agreement was reached, though the struggle for the Sioux was not over.

Gold discoveries in Idaho and Montana prompted the desire for road construction which was designed to pass through prime Sioux hunting grounds. The government promised to pay a modest annuity in exchange for the permission to build roads through Indian territory. The Yanktonai and Upper Yanktonai, along with the Minniconjou, Lower Brule, Two Kettle, Blackfeet, Sans Arc, Hunkpapa and Oglala Sioux agreed to this treaty in 1865. The following year, the Assiniboine from the vicinity of Fort Union agreed to a similar treaty. In addition to these treaties, the United States Government strengthened its military presence on the Missouri river. Fort Sully and Rice were built, while trading posts Fort Union and Fort Berthold were



garrisoned (OEDP 1969:10).

Certain Brule and Oglala Sioux bands refused to participate in the Council of 1865 and threatened to retaliate if attempts were made to build roads or forts in their country. The Red Cloud War followed in an attempt to remove whites from Sioux territory. Forts were attacked and roads were made virtually impassable.

These wars continued until the spring of 1868 when peace was once again attempted with what appeared to be on Indian terms. The land in what is now South Dakota west of the Missouri River, was set aside as the Great Sioux Reservation. Parts of Nebraska, Wyoming and Montana were retained as Indian territory for hunting purposes. Troops were withdrawn and military garrisons at Forts Phil Kearney, C.F. Smith, and Reno were dismantled. The treaty stipulated that whites were only allowed on the reservation with the consent of the Indians, with the exception of those representing the United States Government.

What looked like a total concession on the part of the United States government was actually a strategic plan to civilize the natives. A provision in the treaty called for allotting parcels of land to individual Indians, though it would be twenty years or more before it went into effect. The aim of this policy was to "attack tribalism by instilling American values of private property" (Newell 1981:7). The Indians were encouraged to establish permanent homes and to replace the hunting way of life with an agricultural one. As the buffalo disappeared, the Indians became dependent on the government for survival and agencies were established on the reservation as distribution centers for rations and annuities. The Indians moved their

villages close to the agencies so they could easily receive their goods.

### **The Fort Peck Agency**

Fort Peck began as a makeshift trading post in 1866 after the steamboat Tacony got hung up on a sandbar. "Making the best of the predicament, the crew set up some log buildings and began trading with the Indians. The following year the firm of Durfee and Peck, which had contracts to carry government freight to military posts and Indian agencies, made their way to the upper Missouri and took over the trading post" (Saindon & Sullivan 1977:36). The firm did successful business with the Sioux and Assiniboine in the area.

Approximately 65 miles to the west of Fort Peck, the Milk River Agency was set up in 1870 to distribute annuities and to protect the Gros Ventre, the River Crow and the Assiniboine at Fort Browning near present-day Dodson, Montana. In that the River Crow and Assiniboine were at war with each other, the Superintendent for Montana Territories, Alfred Sully, encouraged the River Crow to go to the Judith Basin to join the Mountain Crow. Most of the River Crow complied with Sully's wishes (Newell 1981:82). Once enemies, but now on friendly terms, the Gros Ventre intermarried with the Upper Assiniboine. By 1871, approximately 6,800 Santee, Yankton, Yanktonai, Cuthead and other Sioux had attached themselves to the Milk River Agency, along with the Gros Ventre, River Crow and Assiniboine (CIA AR 1871:430).

The reason for the growing number of refugees at Fort Peck was that surveyors for the Northern Pacific Railroad, protected with government military power, began

invading Sioux territory to the east. Various bands of Sioux remaining on the Great Sioux Reservation rose in defense of their lands. The surveyors were continually attacked and the government responded by sending reinforcements. Tribal refugees created from the turmoil fled for their lives.

The consequence of the Sioux moving into the Milk River Agency area was that the Gros Ventre, along with the Upper Assiniboine, moved about 40 miles to the east where they began receiving rations at Fort Belknap Trading Post near what is now Chinook, Montana. In 1873, the Sioux and Lower Assiniboine were moved from the Milk River Agency to the Fort Peck Trading Post which was deemed a better location.

As more refugees moved west, the Great Blackfoot Reservation was established by Congress in 1874 for the Assiniboine, Sioux, River Crow, Blackfeet and Gros Ventre. East to west, from the Dakota Territory to the Rocky Mountains, and north to south, from the Missouri River to the present-day Canadian border, this land was held in common by these tribes and included the Teton, Fort Belknap and Fort Peck Agencies.

Fort Peck served as both trading post and Assiniboine/Sioux agency headquarters until 1877, when a flood destroyed the log structures. Later that same year, sixty miles to the east, the Fort Peck Agency was relocated to its present site on the Poplar River at Poplar, Montana. In 1880, The Fort Peck Agency Indians lost a portion of their best hunting grounds south of the Missouri River as the Government reduced Indian lands as per executive order of the President of the United States (Mattison 1955:155-56).

By 1883, there were no more buffalo in the Milk River area. The Sioux and Assiniboine were now completely dependent on the Government for their survival. They remained on the reservation and tried farming, but drought conditions deemed their efforts to failure. The same year, Congress reduced appropriations to feed Indians, including those at Fort Peck Agency (CIA AR 1883:LXI). An Indian inspector to the agency in August of that year noted that "if these Indians are to remain where they are they will have to be fed entirely by the Government, as they cannot be expected to succeed in farming where a white man would starve" (CIA AR 1883:LXII). A few years later, Agent D. O. Cowen at Fort Peck Agency noted that "only about one year in four can be relied on for a crop in this region..."(RCIA 1887:145). Cuts in rations and the disappearance of the buffalo resulted in starving conditions on much of Fort Peck Agency the winter of 1883-84. Rations issued once a week lasted only two or three days (Markoe 1986:58). This continued until a special appropriation from the Commissioner of Indian Affairs temporarily alleviated the problem the following spring.

In addition to hunger, the United States Government attacked Sioux and Assiniboine religious beliefs and traditional ceremonies. In 1883, the government outlawed important native rituals in an attempt to speed up the civilization process. The Sun Dance, which was the most important annual religious ritual, and giveaway ceremonies, which were held one year after the death of a loved one, became illegal. Those continuing in these ways had their rations eliminated.

A few years later, the Indians were pressured once again to cede their lands.

The Great Blackfeet Reservation was broken up to make room for white settlement. "In 1887 the Northwest Commissioners negotiated the formation of the separate Blackfeet, Fort Belknap and Fort Peck reservations" (Woods 1981:24). Severe drought along with ration cuts in the fall of 1889 resulted in a winter plagued with hunger and disease once again for the Sioux and Assiniboine on Fort Peck Reservation. Then the following spring, what had been the Great Sioux Reservation in Dakota Territory was opened to white settlement, resulting in deep resentment among the Sioux.

The combination of these hardships set the scene for the resurgence of native beliefs in the form of the Ghost Dance religion (Mooney 1896). Originating with the Paiute the spring of 1890, this religion promised a new world for the Indians. By following prescribed songs, dances, and behavior, the white man would be pushed back across the ocean and all the Indians, living and dead, would be reunited on earth with their friends and families. The once abundant animal herds would return, led by the buffalo. Special clothes, which the Sioux believed to be bullet proof, were made and worn. These entailed Ghost Shirts for men and Ghost Dresses for women. Giving them new hope, the Ghost Dance religion spread rapidly among the Plains Indians, including the Sioux and Assiniboine on Fort Peck Reservation.

The Ghost Dance religion was viewed suspiciously by the government and outlawed by September 1890, for fear of another outbreak. Rations were cut off to those that continued to dance and troops were stationed near the Sioux reservations. As reported by Agent C. R. A. Scobey, there was not much unrest on Fort Peck reservation. He wrote:

During the late Indian troubles peace and quietness reigned at this agency. Most of the Indians, while believing and hoping for the coming of their 'Messiah,' were not disposed to create any trouble. An emissary from the lower agencies came here to preach the 'new gospel.' He was promptly put off the reservation (CIA AR 1891:283).

Unlike Fort Peck Reservation, trouble was brewing on Rosebud, Pine Ridge, and Standing Rock Reservations in South Dakota. Mounting tensions finally exploded, resulting in the battle at Wounded Knee a few months later.

The events at Wounded Knee demonstrated that Ghost Shirts and Ghost Dresses did not protect the Sioux from the white man's bullets. Nor did the buffalo return to provide for the Indians. The Ghost Dance religion gradually disappeared or merged with other beliefs.

By the turn of the century the Sioux and Assiniboine on Fort Peck Reservation received their individual land allotments of "320 acres of grazing land, 40 acres of irrigable land, and 2 1/2 to 20 acres of timbered land" (Newell 1981:94). Surplus land on the reservation was then sold or opened up to non-Indian homesteaders in 1907.

The aim of the land allotment program was to acculturate the Indians into mainstream American society by eventually dissolving the reservation system. This never happened because of the movement towards Indian self-determination in the 1920s-30s. The Sioux and Assiniboine Tribes on Fort Peck Reservation adopted a constitution with an "old" representative style government in 1927.

The Wheeler-Howard Act of 1934, also known as the Indian Reorganization Act, repealed the land allotment system. Tribalism was encouraged through self-governing reservations, though these goals were never realized. The Tribes on Fort

Peck Reservation rejected the Indian Reorganization Act and continued to manage under their own constitution, which was amended in 1952, and then again in 1960. Presently, the Fort Peck Reservation has a tribal constitution that provides for traditional government in the form of tribal councils. A sixteen member Tribal Executive Board is elected for two year terms to manage reservation business, such as mineral extraction and industry development. Assiniboine and Sioux Tribal Industries in Poplar is "Montana's largest industrial manufacturing employer with an average of 350 employees" (Visitor's Guide To Poplar, Montana, 1992:15). They produce camouflage netting and aluminum products. Fort Peck Tribes also owns and operates oil wells on the reservation.

The Civil Rights movement in the 1960s furthered the cause for tribal control of politics on the reservations and in 1975, Congress passed the Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act. Despite these improvements, poverty and unemployment are still serious problems on Fort Peck Reservation. One way that some Sioux and Assiniboine women supplement their meager family incomes is by making star quilts for giveaway ceremonies. In doing so, they are also supporting native traditions. Quilting might not be a traditional art form, but for centuries, Sioux and Assiniboine women have been fine seamstresses making beautiful moccasins, garments, and robes for gift-giving and giveaway ceremonies. Today, the Star quilt industry on Fort Peck Reservation maintains this tradition.

## THE WOMEN AND THEIR WORK

Historically, Sioux and Assiniboine women were involved in the creation of art which served as tribal symbols in culturally prescribed giveaways. This continues today, though images have evolved and materials have changed. The women on Fort Peck Reservation maintain continuity between the past and present through their art and in using their art in giveaway ceremonies.

In the recent past, Sioux and Assiniboine culture determined social roles according to gender. Historically, men were big game hunters and warriors in Sioux society. Prestige was measured in terms of success in hunting or raiding, and in brave feats of battle. This was important to men because a man with prestige was an attractive husband and viewed as a good provider.

The traditional duties for women were less dangerous, but just as important. Chores revolved around the home and included child care, food preparation, tanning hides, tipi construction, craft work, gathering food and firewood, and general camp care. The most desirable wife was an artisan, especially if she did beautiful beadwork, was a good cook, and knew how to tan a hide. A woman with these skills would bring a high bride-price and honor to her family (Hassrick 1964:42).

Training in the arts began at an early age and was an important part of the female rite of puberty. During her first menstruation, a girl was isolated in a separate tipi for four days where she was instructed by her mother in the art of quillwork and moccasin making (Hassrick 1964:41). After this time, the young woman was expected to do handwork every day. The ability to do fine sewing and quillwork increased her



desirability as a wife and added to her family's prestige. Beautifully decorated clothing was greatly admired and "ultimately enhanced the status of both the wearer and the maker" (Bol 1985:38).

For these women artisans, hunting permeated all aspects of life on the Plains from the end of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century. One measure of wealth was the amount of meat and the number of hides in camp. This meant that a lot of meat and skins needed to be processed. This work had to be undertaken immediately after a hunt, since meat spoiled and skins hardened if there was a delay. Several women processed everything killed by one hunter and "a woman who was extremely skilled could butcher three buffalo a day..." (Niethammer 1977:113). The fat and flesh had to be scraped off the hides as soon as possible, after which the hides could be finished at a later time.

Preparing hides was an art form. The tanner's tool kit consisted of a stone or bone scraper, an antler and flint flesher and a twisted rawhide thong (for softening the leather). Scraping was done by either staking the hide to the ground, or lacing it to a frame. After scraping the flesh side, the hair was removed. The skin was then thinned out to a uniform thickness with the flesher. At this point, the result was rawhide, which was very stiff and was used for moccasin soles or parfleche bags.

The skins were finished in several ways, depending on their predetermined use. Before tanning, the hair was left on hides to be used for robes and bedding. These were made for trade or personal use, and "a woman produced on average about ten hide robes per year..." (Maurer 1992:228). Buffalo robes were a necessary trade item,

consequently, women's labor was a very important factor in obtaining trade goods.

Buffalo robes were essential clothing items for winter on the Plains. Worn with the fur side in, they served as warm outer garments. In milder weather, the fur side was worn on the outside, or replaced with a lighter weight elk hide robe. Men and women wore the buffalo hides taken from young bulls, or cows, while children wrapped up in calf hides. Adult buffalo bull hides were "generally considered too large and heavy for use as clothing" (Ewers 1979:1).

Deer, elk, big horn sheep, and antelope skins were softer than buffalo hide and more appropriate as materials in the manufacturing of moccasin tops and clothing. A hide was softened by rubbing in a brain/liver/fat mixture and leaving on overnight. This was rinsed off the next day, dried, stretched out, and then pulled over a twisted rawhide thong many times until supple. Depending on its size, it took from one to three skins to make a dress. These were designed with the shape of the skin in mind so there was minimal waste of materials. All scraps were saved and used for moccasins, belts, bags, or small pieces of fringe.

Between eleven to twenty-two buffalo-cow hides were required to make a tipi, depending on the size of the lodge. After the skins were collected over a period of time by one woman, she would pass them out to friends and family to be softened. Once this was done, the women would get together for a big feast and sewing party. Working together was a common practice for the reason that "cooperation eased the work-load of the individual woman and provided a social atmosphere as well" (Schneider 1983:107). The actual tipi design was left to a specialist who might be

given a gift for her work. Men sometimes decorated finished tipis with painted designs, though women always owned the lodges.

Recognition and honor went to the woman who excelled in her craft, much as a man obtained prestige for his abilities as a hunter and warrior. The men counted coups and the women counted the number of tipis or robes completed (Schneider 1983:116). The wealth of a man was measured in part by his generosity and he was dependent on the abilities of his wife to make the leather goods to be given away. A poor woman wanting to increase her status could do so by learning a specialized craft (Schneider 1983:111).

Early decoration consisted of applying either quillwork or paint on leather. Women did the quillwork, but both men and women were painters. Tipis, parfleches, shields, buffalo robes and skins were often painted. Women painted non-representational (geometric) patterns while men painted representational designs depicting brave feats in battle or other personal exploits. An embellished buffalo robe was valued for its beauty, as well as offering a woman a chance to display her artistic abilities, and a man a chance to boast.

Paint was made from shales and clays which were ground to fine powders and stored in small leather pouches. These powders were then mixed with water and animal fats when needed for use. The colors were fixed with a glue-like substance made from boiling the "inner membrane of a hide or from the clear juice of cactus"(Horse Capture 1993:78). The paint was applied with rocks, sticks or animal horn cut into different shapes. Brushes were never used (Walker 1982:99-100).

During the 19th century, the "Black Bonnet" design was a popular pattern to paint on buffalo robes among the Sioux, Hidatsa, Mandan, Arikara, Crow and Cheyenne (Ewers 1979:14). This was a design that was painted by women, but only used by the older men (Hassrick 1964:241). The diamond shapes, which radiate out from the center, were described as a "sunlike image" by Maximilian who traveled through Dakota country with the artist Karl Bodmer on a scientific expedition in the 1830's (Goetzmann 1984:314). This design was a precursor to the eight-pointed patchwork star, made from diamond pieces spreading out from a mid-point, that was to become popular on Sioux reservations during the twentieth century.

In addition to paint, quillwork was used to decorate buffalo robes. Collected from porcupines, quills were flattened and dyed with vegetable matter then stitched down in bands of geometric designs. Along with painting, this was the predominant style of decoration on robes, clothing and moccasins until 1830, when glass beads began to replace quills.

White traders introduced small glass beads to the Sioux and Assiniboine at the beginning of the nineteenth century. These beads were manufactured in Italy and about 1/8 inch in diameter. They were called "pony" beads because they arrived with the traders on horseback (Koch 1977:53). Beads were easier to work with than quills and the women preferred the bright colors of the beads over the soft hues of quills colored with natural dyes. Especially desired were beads in the colors of blue, yellow, black, white, green, and red (Orchard 1929:82). Colors had symbolic importance in Sioux ideology (Hassrick 1964:255). Red represented the Sun, blue the Sky, green the

Earth, and yellow the Rock. Black might stand for devotion or evil.

Initially, beads were stitched down in bands of geometric designs, much the same way as quills. Glass "seed" beads became available by 1850, and twenty years later, new elaborate design elements appeared. The seed beads were smaller and more delicate than the pony beads or porcupine quills, making it possible to create more complicated patterns. Among the Sioux, simple geometric forms dominated by empty space were replaced by complex configurations of "smaller triangles, linear projections, and terraced zigzag extensions" filling the space throughout (Horse Capture 1986:11). Traditional designs changed as new materials were incorporated into the culture, in this case, glass beads. Artistic forms were fluid ideas which were continuously exchanged between various tribes, as they were between Indians and whites as well.

An example of this interchange can be seen by comparing Sioux seed bead designs with Caucasus rug patterns available at some of the trading posts in the mid-19th century. There is a strong similarity of form between the two (Lyford 1940:70). The eight-pointed star is one of the patterns that often appears in these rugs from this time period. The same eight-pointed star design emerges for the first time in Plains Indian beadwork after 1870.

The decimation of the buffalo herds coincided with the move to the reservations. The hunting lifestyle of the Sioux was replaced by a sedentary one dependent on government rations. The men were no longer warriors and hunters, but the role for women as cooks and child care providers remained basically the same.

During the early reservation period (1875-1940), Sioux and Assiniboine arts flourished in the midst of tremendous change and turmoil. Traditionally, women's art was a tool for supporting the "system of bravery and generosity by validating the successful warriors, to maintain kinship relationships, and to sustain the system of esteem which in turn led to status and prestige for members of her family" (Bol 1985:39). On reservations, women compensated for the threat of assimilation and the loss of men's positions as hunters and warriors by creating elaborate beadwork. Since 1870, designs were becoming more complex. During the early reservation period, patterns became even more complicated and whole garments were covered with beadwork.

### **Quilting**

Sioux and Assiniboine women also began making quilts for the first time during the early reservation period. As the hunting way of life disappeared and hides became scarce, woven cloth eventually replaced leather. Even though the materials were different, sewing was not a new technique to these women with generations worth of experience stitching together clothing and tipis.

Cloth became available to the Plains tribes through trade by 1850. Along with the traditional materials, shirts and dresses were made from calico fabrics after this date. Wool blankets gradually replaced hide robes. Items that continued to be made from skins were often lined or bound with woven material. Steel needles and thread supplanted bone needles and sinew. Shirts and dresses were made from cloth using the traditional patterns for buckskin clothing, fashioned in the shape of the skin. Scraps were saved and made into quilts, which along with wool blankets, were used in

the place of buffalo robes.

The technique of quilting came to Indian women as part of a program to educate and "civilize" Indians according to President Grant's "Peace Policy" of 1869. Agents were appointed to Indian agencies on the upper Missouri by religious denomination. This policy "permitted the church to which the agency was assigned, to control the education of the Indian children within it and exclude missions of other faiths" while receiving government subsidies (Mattison 1957:145). All Montana agencies, except the Flathead, were turned over to the Methodist Church until the policy was abandoned in the 1880s. By this time, the Presbyterians had established a mission on Fort Peck Reservation and the missionary wives began to teach quilting to the Sioux and Assiniboine women. Due to the ready availability of cloth, "quilting became a dominant handicraft on Sioux reservations" shortly after its introduction (Albers & Medicine 1983:126).

Concurrently in government schools, girls were taught how to quilt, along with other skills such as cooking, cleaning and crocheting. Later, government field matrons and church groups continued to train Sioux women in non-tribal domestic arts, including quilting.

Labor exchange was an indigenous part of Sioux culture. Assistance was expected between kin, with the understanding that it would be reciprocated at some time (Albers 1977:211). As a result, women assembled together to quilt, as they had once done for tanning hides and making tipis. The quilts were inexpensive to make and were useful as warm blankets. As they had once saved all the leather scraps, the

Sioux women now saved fabric scraps from sewing projects or from old clothes to make quilts.

The most ingenious of these thrifty quilters was Mary Scott of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, who made star quilts during the 1930s (Easter 1935:38). Using tobacco bags that her husband Jasper emptied, Mary removed the drawstrings, unraveled the seams and then washed the cord, thread and muslin. The muslin was then dyed to make various colors. These were combined, using the recycled thread, to make a star quilt top. Finally, the drawstrings were used to tie the quilt top to the backing material. It took from 300 to 500 tobacco bags to make one quilt. Jasper went through about 430 bags a year. To increase her output, Mary's friends and family began saving tobacco bags for her too.

Quilting might not have been a traditional skill, but "quilting design principles proved to be compatible with traditional Plains design elements" (Porsche 1987:18). The bead makers and quilters were already familiar with geometric shapes, such as diamonds, squares, triangles and rectangles. It was an easy transition to patchwork patterns. At first, many different quilt patterns were followed, including star designs.

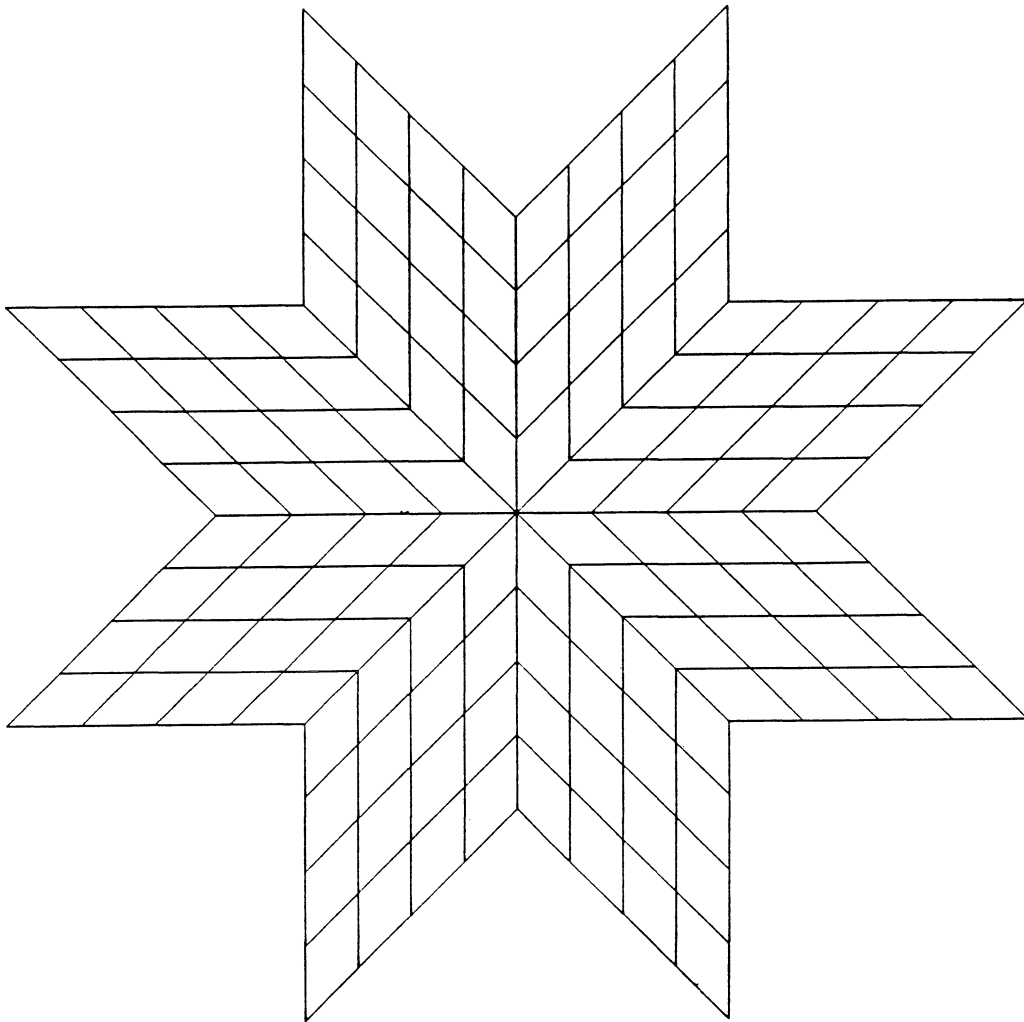
Crazy quilts were particularly popular up until the 1960's (Powers 1990:2). An example of a distinctly Indian style crazy quilt can be seen in the Wolf Point Area Historical Society Museum in Wolf Point, Montana. Using mostly velvet scraps, Louise Marie Chase made this quilt for her own wedding in 1891. The borders and all the fancy feather stitching around the different fabric pieces have been beaded with various colors. The result is a beautiful but heavy quilt. Eventually, the various quilt



patterns gave way to the eight-pointed star, which became a distinctly Sioux expression. Since the 1960s, the trend is to buy material to make a quilt, instead of using fabric scraps (Powers 1990:2). This might cost more, but takes less time than accumulating the material and there is now more color control in the finished quilt top.

The first star quilt seen on the Fort Peck reservation was in 1908, when Nelly Clark "brought two back from South Dakota" (Tucker & Eder 1986,10). The eight-pointed patchwork star was established as an important quilt pattern in the 1920s by Nina First of Fort Kipp (Four Star 1992:6). She had traveled to South Dakota for a church meeting and found that the Sioux women there had a definite preference for making star quilts. When she returned to Fort Kipp she began making star quilts too.

After World War II, the star became the predominant pattern for quilts made on Fort Peck Reservation. This design is known as "The Lone Star" or "Star of Bethlehem" pattern to white quilters. It is composed of diamond-shaped pieces fitted together, radiating out from the center, into a large star (Figure II). Variations of this pattern are seen, but the large single star in the center is the most popular. This is known as the "Morning Star" or simply the "Star" quilt to Sioux and Assiniboine women.



**Figure 2** Lone Star

## THE STAR SYMBOL

The star has appeared as a symbol in Plains Indian art for centuries. Clothing, tipis, and shields were oftentimes adorned with painted or quilled, and later beaded, stars. The importance of this symbol is found in Plain's Indian literature. There are 86 recorded versions of the story generally referred to as "The Star Husband" from Southern Canada and the west, central, and northern parts of the United States (Thompson 1965:419). The basic narration is believed to have originated in the Central Plains, and is as follows:

Two girls are sleeping in the open at night and see two stars. They make wishes that they may be married to these stars. In the morning they find themselves in the upper world, each married to a star—one of them a young man, the other an old man. The women are usually warned against digging but eventually disobey and make a hole in the sky through which they see their old home below. They are seized with longing to return and secure help in making a long rope. On this they eventually succeed in reaching home (Thompson 1965:419).

In Canada, the Sioux believe that the morning star originated from an old medicine man. Before dying, he said;

that after his death he would appear in the heavens early in the morning; that he had come thence and would return in order to prove to the people that he would live there forever. While he was ill he told them to look to the east early on the fourth day after his death and there they would see him as he rose, for he would appear in a manner visible to them. He would have with him a large light that would produce all the colors (of dawn). On the day designated, they saw the star appearing in the east. Now everyone believes this story because the star came as the man said (Wallis 1924:44).

It was believed that the morning star had more power than the sun or the moon because of the experience gained from the time spent on earth as a medicine man.

Among the Lakota, Skan created the star people. "Skan was the sky, and was

also a spirit that was everywhere and that gave life and motion to everything that lives or moves" (Walker 1983:9). Skan created Tate, the wind, to be his messenger. Tate traveled over the earth and the star people were created to illuminate Tate's path when he worked at night. Skan commanded the star people to "see all that transpired upon the world at night and to tell him what they saw" (Walker 1983:220). Skan sent the star person, Wohpe, to earth to live with Tate. She relays the message to create the four directions using Tate's four sons, the North, East, South and West Winds. The four directions were an important part of Sioux cosmology. They were represented in the form of a cross, the same symbol used to represent stars.

During the time of the Ghost Dance Religion, dance garments were decorated with an abundance of stars. The sun and the moon were also dominant motifs and, along with stars, were painted onto faces, shirts, dresses, and leggings. The Sioux usually made their Ghost Dance clothing out of muslin, or even flour sacks, while other tribes continued to use skins. Traditionally, stars were represented as a Maltese style cross and this is what is found on most Ghost Dance clothing. Five-pointed stars in the style of the American flag sometimes appeared, as well. Other cosmic symbols were depicted on Ghost Dance clothing as follows: the sun as a circle, the moon as a crescent, and "falling stars, or the many stars of the heavens" as "dashes of paint" (Peterson 1976:30).

Before the Ghost Dance movement, stars were used as protective symbols on shields and other objects (Wissler 1907:39). This was most probably due to the importance of celestial bodies in Plains Indian philosophy. Dreams and visions most

often provided the ideas for the protective designs on shields, as they did for the decoration of Ghost Dance clothing later. The painting on a shield was done by the owner, or a holy man who then imbued protective powers into the shield. The design could not be reproduced by anyone other than the one possessing the shield.

Black Elk was a holy man amongst the Oglala on the Pine Ridge Reservation during the first part of this century. He saw the morning star in a vision and, referring to his people, relayed this message: "It shall be a relative to them; and who shall see it, shall see much more, for thence comes wisdom; and those who do not see it shall be dark" (Neihardt 1975:29). After an official ceremony to proclaim his vision to the people, Black Elk got up early every morning to see the arrival of the daybreak star. Often times he was joined by others, and when the star appeared, they would say "Behold, the star of understanding" (Neihardt 1975:148). So, for Black Elk and his people, the morning star was a symbol for wisdom and understanding.

Among the Oglala today, the star quilt has replaced the buffalo robe as a symbol for death and rebirth in the curing ceremony known as Yuwipi. In a dark room, "the medicine man is wrapped up and tied in a star quilt, then freed by spirit helpers" who advise the medicine man how to cure his patient (Powers 1982:279). In other Oglala religious ceremonies, the star quilt is placed on the sweat lodge, and worn by those on vision quests.

Patricia Albers and Beatrice Medicine believe the morning star represents immortality (1983:129). In April, the morning star appears in the east. This is from the same direction that the spirits of the dead travel to earth. Therefore, the morning

star is the connection between the dead and living. This is especially significant in view of the fact that today the star quilt is used to wrap new babies, as well as to wrap and bury the dead.

The morning star is a symbol for leadership which adorns the ceremonial clothing and tipis of the old chiefs, according to Chief Flying Iron (1935:33). As the morning star leads the sun on its path across the sky, so the old chiefs lead their people with their good light of council and advice. The eight pointed star is the symbol for the morning star. The eight points represent the four stages of life—infancy, youth, maturity and old age—along with the four cardinal directions (Flying Iron 1935:34).

The number four is indisputably an important symbol in Sioux cosmology. In addition to the four human life stages and the four directions, there are four elements above the earth: the Sun, the Moon, the Sky and the Stars. There are four classes of Gods—Superior, Associate, Subordinate and Spirits—as there are four classes of animals—flying, crawling, four-legged and two-legged. There are four parts to plants—roots, stem, leaves and fruit—and time is divided into the four sections of day, night, moon, and year (Hassrick 1964:256).

In the star quilt, some see a circle as the dominant form (Tucker and Eder 1986:4). This can be seen in the last row of diamonds before the points of the star radiate out into different directions. In Sioux symbology, the circle is sacred. "Everything in nature, save the rock, is round. Therefore the circle was, for the Sioux, a sacred symbol and could indicate the universe, the sun, time, or direction, depending

on its particular form and color" (Hassrick 1964:256).

Currently on Fort Peck Reservation, the single most important function of the star quilt is its prominent place in the giveaway ceremony. Consequently, the star has become a symbol for honor, after the honor one receives when getting or giving a star quilt. Also, because of its association with a traditional ceremony, the star quilt is now a symbol for Indian ethnicity. Star quilts are displayed as ethnic banners at Indian events and in parades on the reservation.

The evolution of a symbol is an ongoing process. This can be readily seen with the star quilts on Fort Peck Reservation. After the demise of the buffalo, Sioux and Assiniboine women adapted quilts to the role of buffalo robes as bedding, outer garments, and giveaway items. Later, the star quilt in particular was adopted into the culture because of the importance of the star symbol in traditional beliefs. Today, star quilts are the most valued objects in a giveaway pile on Fort Peck Reservation. Star quilts give identity and meaning to those who participate in the traditional Indian way of life. Consequently, they have become symbols for traditional Indian ideology.

## THE QUILTERS ON FORT PECK RESERVATION

The first contact I made with a star quilter on the Fort Peck Reservation was through a business card. A friend of mine passing through the area had noticed some star quilts for sale in a small shop in Wolf Point. She sent me the quilter's business card, which I used to set up an interview. After the initial interview, I hoped to be able to meet additional quilters with little difficulty.

In early July 1992, I headed for the Fort Peck Reservation to do the fieldwork for my research on the fabrication and function of the Native American star quilt. This was to entail getting oral histories from several women about their experiences as quilters on the reservation. I also planned to attend the Iron Ring Celebration in Poplar to witness a giveaway ceremony. A small grant provided me with enough resources to stay on the reservation for two weeks.

### **Edna Smith, Swedish**

Edna Smith was the first quilter that I interviewed. I must admit that I was a little bit disappointed to find out that she was Swedish. In my letter, I had explained that the subject of my research was the Native American star quilt. Nonetheless, Edna is a very adept quilter, and one of the best on the reservation in terms of workmanship. She loves to talk about her craft, and as it turns out, she's married to an Assiniboine man and is familiar with some of the Indian traditions.

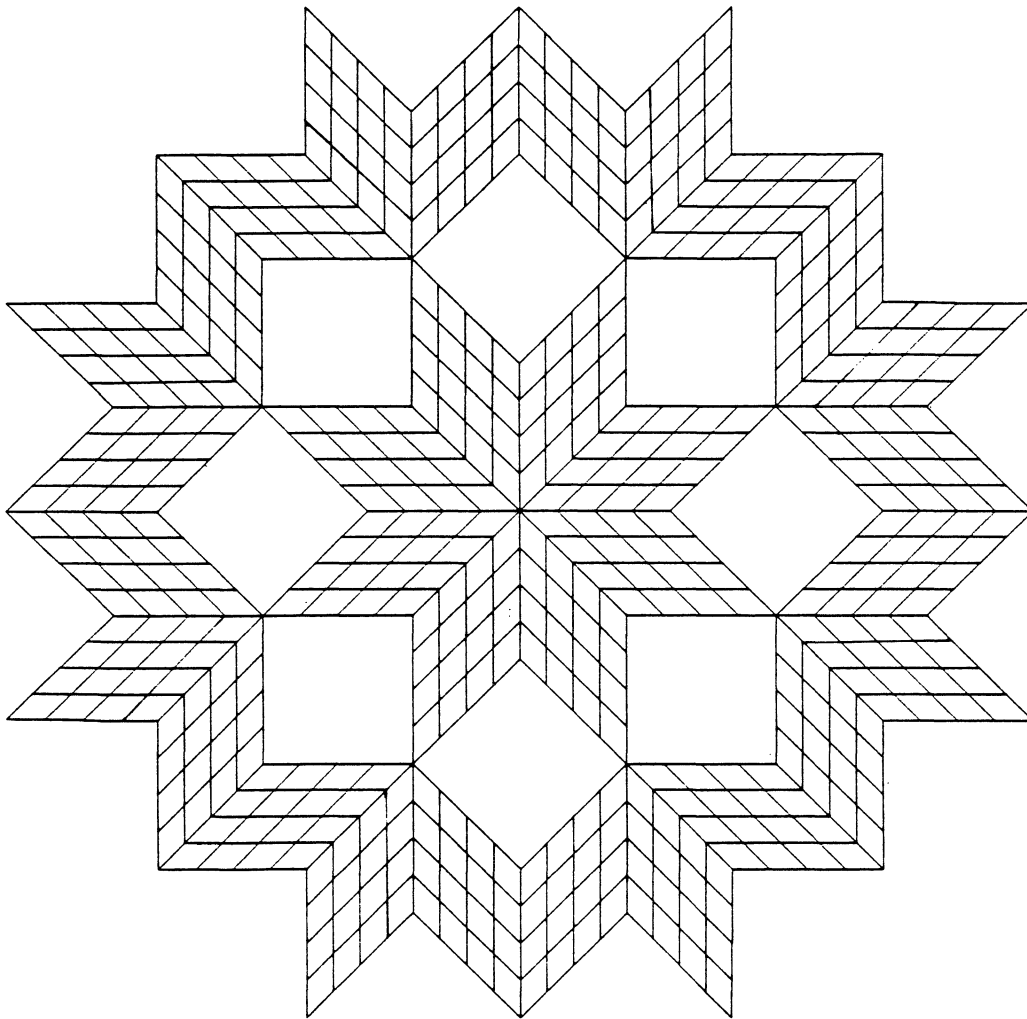
Born in North Dakota in 1917, Edna was raised in Montana, just off the Fort Peck Reservation near Scobey. Her parents died when she was nine years old, after which time, the eight children raised each other. Edna married Hermit Manny Smith



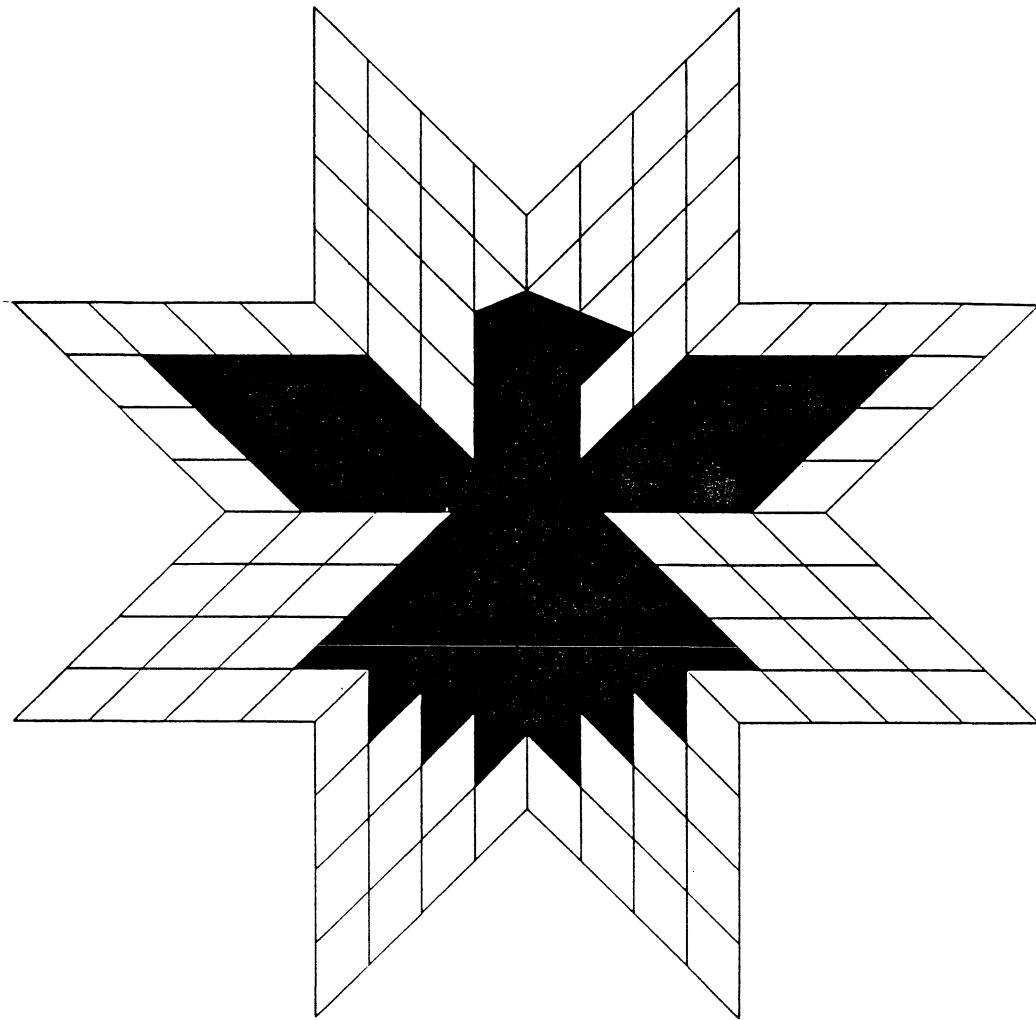
when she was nineteen and they moved to Wolf Point, where they raised three children. The Smiths retired from farming in 1989 when their youngest son took over. The farm is part of the original land allotted to the Smith family at the beginning of this century.

Sewing came easy to Edna due to the influence of her mother who had been a professional seamstress for a large department store in Fargo, North Dakota. Edna made her own clothes from the age of ten. It was her mother-in-law, Nellie Hall, that got her started on star quilts. When born, each of Edna's children came home from the hospital wrapped in a star quilt made by their Assiniboine grandmother. After the death of her mother-in-law in 1962, Edna made twenty star quilt tops for the memorial giveaway one year later. Since that time, Edna has continued the tradition of making a star quilt for all the new babies in the family, even for those not yet born. She has also made a full-size star quilt as a wedding gift for each of her grandchildren. Edna makes quilts using various patchwork designs—she made the "Double Wedding Ring" quilt that is on her bed—but the star is her favorite pattern, including the "Lone Star" (Figure II), "Tulip Star" (a "Lone Star" with appliqued tulips in the corners), "Broken Star" (Figure III) and "Eagle Star" (Figure IV).

Inspiration for color combinations come from looking at bolts of cloth in quilting stores and leafing through quilting books and magazines. She uses a cotton/polyester blend of material in solid colors and calicos. She likes the feel of good quality one hundred percent cotton but doesn't like the wrinkles. Her palette consists of both pastels and bright colors. Edna is in awe of the way the Indian



**Figure 3** Broken Star



**Figure 4** Eagle Star

women on Fort Peck Reservation put bold colors together to make star quilts. She commented:

Their sense of color is tremendous! Some of it can be like, 'I've got this so I'll put it together with some of that'. But most of them go in and they buy their colors that they want to put together. And I think that is tremendous. Just try copying it! You can't do it. I can't do it. I can't go in and do that.

Picking the color combination for a quilt wasn't always easy for Edna. When she was especially frustrated, her mother-in-law would tell her to "put your tail feathers on and then pick out your colors". The blanket that Edna was quilting when I was there was a "Broken Star" pattern done in shades of pink, teal and burgundy. She also had five other quilts that she was working on at the same time in different stages of completion.

Edna makes from twelve to fifteen quilts a year. A star quilt is made from small diamond pieces cut out from different colored material and sewn together with a sewing machine into strips. The strips are then stitched together into large diamond shapes, which make up the center of each star and the eight different points. The large patchwork star is attached to the background material, or "filler", which has been carefully picked to harmonize with the other colors. The filler is a print or solid colored fabric pieced together from triangular and squares shapes that fit around the star. A large square is the end result. Strips of contrasting fabric are added to the square to make a border and a bed-sized rectangle. Sometimes the borders are pieced together from more than one fabric. At this point, the quilt top is complete and ready to attach to the batting and backing materials.

Batting is made from cotton, wool, or most commonly, polyester, and is sandwiched between the top and the back of the quilt for warmth. Quilting is necessary to attach the quilt top to the backing fabric while securing the batting in place. The three layers are carefully laid out on a flat surface and basted together using long running stitches. The quilt is then stretched out onto a quilting frame, while pulling taut from the center of the quilt to prevent the fabric from puckering. Once on the frame, small uniform stitches are taken through all three layers to prevent the batting from shifting during use and laundering. These stitches are usually done in a decorative pattern to add to the beauty of the finished quilt.

Oftentimes, Edna hires someone to do the quilting for her. She used to send her quilts to Indiana to be hand quilted by an Amish woman. Her own hand quilting stitches are small and precise. She quilts the borders on a sewing machine "in the ditch", hidden along a seam. Some of these quilts are made for her family, as previously mentioned. She also makes quilts to sell in a small gift shop in downtown Wolf Point. This gift shop is one of two places on the reservation where someone can buy a ready-made star quilt (the museum shop in Poplar is the other). A baby quilt sells for sixty dollars, full-size for two hundred and fifty.

Edna also gets special orders to make quilts. Most of the star quilts made on the reservation are commissioned for giveaway ceremonies, and Edna only rarely receives an order for one of these. When I interviewed her, she had just received an order for six quilts to be made for a naming ceremony giveaway. These were to be twin-size quilts for five and six year old boys. Every summer she is also

commissioned by the Wolf Point Stampede Committee to do two star quilts which are then raffled off to raise money for the parade and rodeo.

One of Edna's sons has received thirty-two patchwork quilts over the years. These were given to him for birthday, Christmas and wedding gifts from his mother, aunt, and grandmother. The quilts have never been used and he keeps them in a trunk in the basement. Obviously, he appreciates the artistic value of these quilts over and above any utilitarian value, even though they are not on display at the moment.

Edna admits to feeling some resentment from the Indian community for being white and making star quilts. This might seem odd given the fact that the eight-pointed star patchwork pattern came to the Sioux via the white missionaries. But regardless of where the expression came from, the star quilt is very much a symbol for Indian ethnicity on the Fort Peck Reservation today.

After this interview, I was at a dead end. Edna didn't have any close contact with Indian quilters on the reservation. She did give me the names of some quilters, which I tried to arrange interviews with over the phone, but to no avail. I lost five days worth of time trying to make the next contact. Finally, I called Bernice Norgard, a Norwegian, elderly aunt of a friend of mine. She lives on a farm in Brockton, situated between Poplar and Culbertson. Brockton is a small town with a population of 365, most of whom are Sioux.

Bernice was interested in my project and helped me try to track down some quilters. Between phone calls, she showed me the collection of star quilts she had in her home. Years ago, her son had received a star quilt for his work with the Brockton

basketball team. Bernice was given a satin star quilt in appreciation for some service that she had rendered. Both of these quilts had never been used and were kept wrapped in plastic in a closet.

Many of the homes in Brockton do not have phones, and not being able to catch someone at home who did, Bernice finally took me to a quilter. She introduced me to Rita Belgarde, a seventy-four year old star quilter, who also has two daughters that quilt. Rita agreed to an interview in my car. It was pouring rain outside and the car I was driving was a cramped Volkswagen Rabbit. To make matters worse, I didn't have batteries for my tape recorder. However, I wasn't about to reject her terms for an interview, so once in the car, I frantically scribbled down everything Rita had to say about making star quilts. She seemed to be suspicious of me until about half way through the interview when she visibly began to relax.

After the interview, I felt honored when Rita invited me into her house to show me the first star quilt that one of her daughters, Rae Jean, had made more than twenty years ago. Rita's grandson proudly showed me a star quilt that he had received at a basketball tournament the previous winter. Both quilts were well worn. The old one was made out of taffeta and badly torn. Rae Jean had made her first star quilt, with all of its mistakes, for herself. She was now a well respected quilter in the area. The old quilt was no longer useable, but obviously a keepsake that Rita cherished for sentimental reasons. The newer quilt, though only a few months old, was already torn and stained. These quilts are not kept in trunks, and are no doubt meant to be used.

### **Rita Belgarde, Sioux**

Born ten miles from where she lives today, Rita has always lived in the Brockton area, except during the B.I.A. relocation program in the 1950s and 1960s when she and her family lived in Indiana and California. Now a widow, Rita was once married with two sons and two daughters. Her husband and one of her sons were stabbed to death in 1963. The other son is now in the State Penitentiary at Deer Lodge. Both of her daughters, Judy Johnson and Rae Jean Walking Eagle, live next door to Rita in Brockton, and like their mother, are producers of fine star quilts.

As mentioned earlier, the Presbyterians were the first to introduce the technique of quilting to the Fort Peck Reservation in the 1890s to help in the civilization process of the Indians. Rita's uncle, Reverend Red Eagle, was a well known Presbyterian minister on the reservation when Rita was growing up. Rita's mother began making star quilts in the 1930's or 1940's for the Ladies Aid, a Presbyterian women's group. Currently, quilting is still popular with the Presbyterian women on the reservation.

To encourage them in the craft of quilting, and to improve their technique, mothers allowed children to work on a corner of a quilt. If the quilting was not up to par, it was later taken out and redone. Rita learned to quilt from her mother this way and taught both her daughters likewise. The practice of encouraging young quilters by imitation is still a popular technique for passing along quilting skills.

In her prime, Rita could make a quilt in two days time. Now age has slowed her down, but she still makes five or six quilts a month. Being her own boss and flexible hours are the benefits of being a quilter, according to Rita. She likes to stay



up late and work on quilts. She always worked alone before, but now works with Judy on big quilts. When large orders come in, such as ten quilts for a giveaway, Rita divides the order up with both her daughters. This way, the three of them can get the order out in just a couple of weeks.

Rita's daughter Judy can piece and quilt a star blanket in one long day if her husband helps her with the quilting. In addition to quilts, Judy makes jackets that have the eight-pointed patchwork star on the back. These jackets are fairly popular on the reservation. When there are not any orders, Rita and Judy are still making quilts which they later take door to door until they find buyers. Someone is always amassing star quilts for the next giveaway. All the extra money Rita makes from quilting is used to help support her large extended family.

Rita stocks up on material whenever she is out of town. For example, last year while in Billings for the state championship basketball tournament, she stocked up on quilting supplies from the various fabric stores. She prefers to sew with a cotton/polyester blend in bright solid colors only. She picks her colors for a particular quilt by laying out the fabric that she has on hand. By placing various colors side by side, she intuitively finds a harmonious combination. She showed me the process by sticking her hand into a bag of scraps and pulling out a riot of color. Within about fifteen seconds, she had a surprising yet pleasing color combination picked out for a quilt, using quite a few different colors.

In the past, Rita has made other styles of quilts beside the star pattern. Her daughter Rae Jean showed me an exquisite Victorian style crazy quilt top that her

mother had made in the 1940s. Never finished, it was stored in a trunk for almost fifty years before being discovered. Rae Jean wants to put a backing on it and display the quilt in some way. Rita has made crazy star quilts before too. She uses a newspaper template which she removes afterwards.

Within the family, Rita made star quilts for all of her children when they were born. She tried to make quilts for her grandchildren and great-grandchildren as well, but she couldn't keep up after awhile. A star quilt is given to members of her family for no other occasion.

After the interview with Rita, I had an inside connection to quilters involved in the giveaway tradition. There were no further problems arranging interviews with quilters. All I needed to say was that I got their name from Rita Belgarde and they agreed to an interview with me. The only constraint now was time, and I was doing two interviews a day to make up for the time I had already lost.

### **Helen Boyd, Sioux**

Helen Boyd has a reputation for being the quickest and busiest quilter in the Brockton area, so I went to speak with her next. When I arrived, she asked me how long this was going to take because she didn't have much time. She had two star quilts and twenty patchwork star pillows to make in four days.

Born and raised in Brockton, Helen has lived there all of her life. She is married with two sons and a daughter, the youngest of whom was soon to leave for college in Bozeman.

By watching her mother and grandmother make quilts, Helen just picked it up

and began making quilts when she was twenty-one years old. Helen's daughter has done the same thing and has been quilting since she was fourteen. The two usually work together, Helen doing all the cutting and piecing, and her daughter helping with the quilting.

Helen makes quilts in all different kinds of fabrics; satin, taffeta, cotton/polyester and cotton. The satin is the most difficult to work with because it slides around so easily. She uses whatever material the person commissioning the quilt wants. When I asked her if she used solid colors or prints, she responded:

I use prints. In fact, I like those better than I like that plain stuff. I like plain, print, plain, print... you know, into the star quilt. You try to match, like if you have a pink print, you try to put either a bright pink or a pale pink in there. You just try to match them. Same with solids. You put a dark blue with a light blue, a dark red with a lighter red. Purple with lavender. That's just the way I do it.

Helen has a system for putting her fabrics and colors together by alternating print with plain, and light with dark. She gets most of her fabric in Poplar, where the local hardware store stocks a wide array of material for quilters, mostly the solid colors, in satin, taffeta and cotton/polyester. A Walmart in Williston, North Dakota, about sixty miles away, also has a good selection of fabric. Whenever Helen travels somewhere, she picks up some material.

Quilt making is Helen's full-time job. She makes about ten quilts a month and gets orders year round. People know where to get a star quilt when they need one and Helen tries to keep the price down for giveaway quilts. She offered the following:

I don't charge that much either because I don't work and I enjoy sewing so then I can stay home. I think that's the reason that a lot of people come, because I know that things are expensive nowadays.

As a result of her reasonable prices and reputation as a fast quilter, Helen is very busy, by far the busiest of the women that I interviewed. Other quilters in a bind for time recommend her to their customers, and Helen rarely turns a job down, especially if it is for another Indian. Married to a man who has a good job with the tribal government in Poplar, Helen is more concerned with supporting the giveaway tradition on the reservation than making a fortune from her quilts. As she explained:

I hate to tell a person 'no' because I know that if they go to another place they will charge them really high. Look at the museum. Cotton ones are a hundred and forty-five. And at that Indian store there I saw them yesterday it was two hundred and twenty-five. I know the Indian people can't afford that, so I hate to tell them 'no'.

Helen only works on quilts during the day because it is too hard on her eyes to sew at night. With the help of her daughter, she puts a quilt on the frame in the morning, and by afternoon it comes off fully quilted. When set up, the quilting frame takes up her whole living room, so it is advantageous for her to finish a quilt as soon as possible. I wonder if she has ever thought of putting the quilting frame on ropes and pulleys and storing it out of the way, against the ceiling. Elva Turning Stone, a quilter in Poplar who lives in a small house, devised this system for keeping her quilts out of the way when she wasn't working on them (Pulford 1989:65).

The only completed quilt in the house that Helen could show me was a red, white, and blue satin star quilt; classic colors for a veteran. This she had made for her son when he was in the Persian Gulf War. In addition to the quilt for him, Helen was busy making quilts for the giveaway to be held in his honor when he returned. She noted:

When he was in Desert Storm, he was there from the very beginning to the very end. He left in August and he didn't get back into the States until March 28. All the time he was there I did quilts and was putting them away so that when he came back we had a dance and a big giveaway for him. That's where all the quilts went.

The interview with Helen was quick, as I promised her it would be. She rushed off to her quilting as I packed up my notes to leave. When I saw her again five days later, I asked about the two quilts and twenty pillows. True to her reputation as a fast quilter, she had finished them on time.

### **Sybil Lambert, Sioux**

Born and raised in Brockton, Sybil has lived in this town her entire life. In her sixties now, she learned to quilt from her sister-in-law more than forty years ago, not long after Sybil married Barney Lambert. They have seven children, three daughters and four sons. Two of the three daughters are quilters, after their mother, one of whom regularly helps Sybil quilt.

Taffeta and a cotton/polyester blend are the kinds of material that Sybil uses. She's allergic to satin and 100% cotton reminds her of burlap. She buys her fabric at the Walmart in Williston, North Dakota, the Ben Franklin in Wolf Point, or at the hardware store in Poplar. The Walmart in Williston has good prices but she observed:

They don't have that many colors. Poplar does. As far as the women, they know that our women really sew those, so they really get the colors.

Sybil only employs solid colors in her quilts because she thinks they are prettier that way. She gets her ideas for color combinations from her environment, by observing the landscape, or a picture in a magazine. On the way to Poplar one day,

she saw a beautiful rainbow and wrote the colors down. These were the same colors that she used in a quilt later. She likes using the dark colors of autumn leaves, though she notices that other Indian women prefer to use brighter colors. Sybil is always thinking about quilts in the back of her mind. She stated:

Even after I go to bed I think if I have to make a quilt for someone and I think out the colors. Yeah, I do. Star quilts.... I think it's part of me sometimes. Especially when I have to set it up and it's in the middle of the dining room.

Within the family, Sybil makes star quilts as gifts for high school graduation and for the birth of a baby. During basketball season, she makes quilts for her grandsons to give away at the tournaments, sometimes making as many as eight in three weeks time. The other quilts that Sybil makes are on a commission basis, usually for giveaways. She charges \$125.00 for a full-size quilt ordered by someone on the reservation. The price doubles for tourists.

Sybil made a special quilt that was presented to Senator John Melcher when he was in office, on behalf of the seven reservations in Montana. The taffeta patchwork star was comprised of sixteen peace pipes that came together to form eight tipis. Each tipi represented a reservation in Montana, plus "Fort Washakie Reservation" (The Wind River Reservation) in Wyoming. The tipis are camped in a circle around a bonfire. Peace is the topic of discussion, symbolized by the peace pipes. Barney Lambert took a trip to Washington D.C. a few years after the quilt was given to Senator Melcher. While there, Barney was compelled to stop in to Melcher's office and mention the quilt. He arrived to find the quilt hanging in a prominent position, above Melcher's desk (as was appropriate).

Always sewing in a hurry, Sybil periodically gets large orders in addition to the usual request of three or four quilts a month. She gets help with some of these orders, but works alone much of the time. Basketball season is a busy time for her, as are the summer months with the powwow season. On the Fort Peck Reservation, there are two powwow celebrations a month. During each day of a powwow, several giveaways are scheduled. At each giveaway, anywhere from as few as four to as many as twenty star quilts are distributed. This demonstrates the demand on the reservation for the work of quilters.

As did Rita Belgarde's mother, Sybil also makes quilts to raise money for the Presbyterian Church with the Ladies Aid group. Every August, twenty-seven churches in Montana and North Dakota congregate for a mission meeting in a different location each year. One of the events during this annual meeting is a quilt contest and sale. These are usually star quilts which must be stitched completely by hand, from the piecing and quilting, to the binding around the edges. Besides being a big fund raiser, it is a quilt show where each quilter shows their work with pride.

At the contest and sale, the quilts are hung all around a large tent. Judges, who have previously been designated from the Ladies Aid group, award the first, second and third place winners. The decisions are based on two criteria; workmanship and overall appearance. The quilters from Brockton have taken first place for several years. Prospective buyers come to look at the quilts and pick out the one they want, though some of the quilts are sold before they are finished. All the money from the quilt sales goes to the church.

### **Loretta Bear Cub, Sioux**

The Tribal Office in Poplar was the setting for my interview with Loretta Bear Cub. Trained as a nurse, Loretta worked at the hospital in Culbertson, Montana for seventeen years, before getting the job at the Tribal Office. She works forty hours a week, often times traveling around the reservation, educating women about such things as nutrition and child care.

Living in Fort Kipp, about ten miles east of Brockton, Loretta is widowed with a son and two daughters. Both of her daughters are quilters, the youngest of whom lives nearby and often helps her mother quilt. Loretta raised her children to respect their Indian traditions. She proudly stated:

I have a boy that sings....he goes around to all the pow-wows. The girls dance and now their children are dancing and carrying on. They were all given Indian names at an early age.

When she was in high school, Loretta learned to quilt from her mother. She didn't pay too much attention at the time, but later when she had children, Loretta began making star quilts to give away at their naming ceremonies. Fifteen to twenty quilts are needed for each ceremony, and to buy them from someone else was too expensive. She continues to make quilts for the giveaways in conjunction with traditional ceremonies for her family, in addition to taking orders from others in need of quilts for the same reason. When I spoke with her, she was in the process of making star quilts for her brother's memorial giveaway. Goods are accumulated for one year after the death of a loved one, after which time there is a feast and giveaway.

At a family giveaway, Loretta is the one that presents a quilt. The one being



honored stands up with her and holds the blankets. Loretta emphasized the importance of continuing the giveaway tradition as an integral part native ceremony:

I'm teaching my children the same thing so that they'll know what to do when I'm not around. They're all doing that now. Especially my son. I just gave him all this stuff and said 'now it's up to you'. So he did. He did a good job. I want all my children to carry on our traditions. That's what they enjoy doing. They have a lot of respect for their elders.

Loretta might work full-time, but she still makes four to five quilt tops a week by sewing in the evenings. She prefers the piecing to the quilting, so like Edna, she often hires someone to do the quilting for her, though Loretta does all the stitching on the quilts that she makes for her own giveaways. She explained:

I'm working on a cotton for myself. This is for that memorial. When I have these giveaways I want to do them myself. I don't want someone else to do it....the quilting part.... it'll set me back because I do the quilting too. I'll just have to do as many as possible. In the winter maybe I'll do the stitching. I try to do everything myself.

In addition to the plain star, Loretta makes quilts with an eagle or warbonnet. She draws her own designs, which are then appliqued and embroidered in the center of the star. She never follows a pattern. She matches solid colors by laying them all out first. She described her color selection:

I just use the colors that I think would go good together. I don't just use any color. I try to match them.... My orders, they tell me what colors they want. So then they say they want a blue background. Well, then I use the colors that I think will show up nice.....And the thing that I do too, if I use dark colors, I try to use a light background to bring out the colors. I don't use a dark with a dark. I don't use too much of one color because it's too much of one color.

Loretta prefers to make her quilts from brilliantly colored satin. The shiny fabric is trickier to work than the cotton/polyester blends because it is slick. The

diamond patchwork pieces must be cut with pinking shears and the pieces are difficult to sew together perfectly because the material is so slippery. Also, fuzz from the satin gets into the bobbins and needs to be cleaned out frequently. But, the bright colors, along with the sheen from the satin, make a dazzling quilt. Loretta buys the satin locally, at the hardware store in Poplar. There she finds satin of good quality, in a variety of colors, and at reasonable prices. It might cost more in terms of time and expense, but a satin star quilt is the most valued of the quilts made on the reservation. There is a definite preference for vividly colored star quilts, and the satin quilts are the flashiest of them all.

Indian tradition is very important to Loretta and making star quilts for giveaways is a significant part of the Indian tradition on Fort Peck Reservation. In addition to her personal contributions to keep this tradition alive, Loretta is also making every effort to encourage her children to do the same so that giveaways and traditional ceremonies will continue to be a part of Indian culture in the future.

#### **Almira Jackson, Assiniboine**

Born in Fraser, Montana in 1917, Almira has spent most of her life on the west end of the reservation. She went to boarding school in Poplar from the time she was nine until she was thirteen years old. The boarding school was a dreaded place. Once, Almira was backhanded across the face and lifted off her feet for speaking her tribal language.

Almira came down with tuberculosis when she was thirteen. Several of her brothers and sisters, as did her mother, died from the disease. Her father died soon

after. Orphaned and ill, Almira was sent to Fort Lapwai, Idaho, where there was an asylum for Indians with tuberculosis. Fort Lapwai was a refuge for her. The people were kind, the food was good, and Almira occupied herself by sewing, painting, weaving, and making pots. She stayed for three years, after which time she returned to the reservation and lived with a sister.

Almira married Theodore Jackson in 1935. They lived by farming, then they traveled "around" working on different ranches. They adopted a daughter from Almira's sister and finally settled outside of Fraser. In 1972, they moved to Wolf Point into a house built by the tribe. Now a widow, and seventy-five years old, Almira continues to live in Wolf Point and is a renown quilt maker. She also has a reputation for making fine headdresses.

Quilting came to Almira through her mother-in-law, but not exactly by example. She declared:

My mother-in-law was a gad-about. She'd make these quilts and she'd make a little bit and then she'd leave. She'd be gone all day. So I'd sit down there and finish them. I seen how she'd did it and learned how. So I've been doing it ever since.

The decor in her house is a testimony to Almira's love of patchwork. The curtains, sofa throws, and numerous pillows are all made from quilting leftovers. A wild mix of colors dominates the room.

Almira pieces her quilts together with both solid colors and prints, though sometimes she prefers to use only the solid colors. The quilt she was working on while I was there was such a quilt. She called it a sunburst, made with bright blue, yellow and orange solid colored cotton/polyester blend fabric. Pure cotton material is

hard to come by and is more expensive, so Almira usually uses the blend. She makes satin and taffeta quilts if that is what someone orders, but finds that it is harder to get straight seams when the material is sliding around. She once even made a quilt out of lame, which is a brocaded fabric woven from various fibers combined with silver or gold thread. The metallic threads give a sheen to the quilt, and the material grips so it's easier to sew than the satin or taffeta.

A whole quilt is envisioned in Almira's head before she even begins to work. Color schemes come to her in flashes of inspiration, or in dreams. In addition to the plain star in the center, Almira makes more elaborate star quilts. In one of her quilts entitled "The History of the Assiniboine", the star is made up of eight tipis in a circle, with a tipi in each corner of the quilt. Fancy quilts such as this are a result of Almira's contact with Florence Pulford, a quilt collector from California, in the 1970s. Pulford also encouraged Almira to work in earth tones because the colors seemed more "Indian". Fortunately, Almira couldn't change her love for bright colors. She explained:

There are colors I like, some I don't like. I mix them up with colors I like. I have no favorite color. I love them all. And I notice white people like browns and rusts....My friend, she brings me all these colors.... To me, those are ugly, and I have to just tell her. And she brings me just gobs of them too, at a time. Just piles! And I say '....how come you never bring Indian colors?' 'These are Indian colors'. 'Oh, no they're not', I said. 'An Indian woman would drop dead before she'd use any of those on her star quilt'!

Almira used to finish one quilt in a day, setting it on the frame when the school bus passed in the morning and taking it off the frame by the time the bus returned in the afternoon. The frame was attached to the ceiling and Almira quilted

standing up. Now she makes two quilts a week if she is doing nothing else, but usually averages four quilts a month. She no longer quilts by hand because of arthritis, and she prefers to do all her quilting on a machine, as opposed to hiring someone to do the hand stitching for her. She added:

I don't have anybody touch my quilts because they don't do it good enough. I made a top for a lady down the street here. A red, white and blue one. Beautiful! She had it quilted. She got somebody to quilt it. When I saw it, it had big ugly stitches on it. I said 'don't tell anybody I made that top'. I'm ashamed of it. Ruin my reputation.

All of Almira's relatives have at least one of her star quilts. Some have two or three. Her quilts have been exhibited in the Edmund S. Wight Gallery at the University of California, Los Angeles, Museum of Man, San Diego, Museum of the Rockies, Bozeman, Montana, and the Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona (Pulford 1989:79). Almira is an extraordinary fabric artist, who is concerned with the craftsmanship of each of her creations, in addition to the overall effect. She commented:

I think that when you make an effort to do something, you should go out and do it good. Do it the best you can. It takes your time and the material.

### **Rae Jean Walking Eagle, Sioux**

The daughter of Rita Belgarde, Rae Jean lives in Brockton, Montana with her husband and daughter, next door to her mother and sister. Quilting was something that was always going on at the house when Rae Jean was growing up. There weren't any general assistance or welfare programs at that time, so after the death of her father in 1964, Rae Jean's mother paid the bills by making star quilts. Rita did a

considerable amount of sewing and it was all done by hand at that time.

When she was in the fourth grade, Rae Jean received her first sewing machine as a gift from her uncle. She enjoyed making clothes for her dolls, using fabric scraps. Rae Jean recalled:

Then as I grew older, I began sewing my own clothes. Then I always wanted to be into fashion. I wanted to be a fashion designer so bad!....But I never got there. So the quilting part, that's where I think it comes out. I love to play with the colors....

Rae Jean learned to quilt by practicing on the corner of a quilt, as her mother had done years before that. Afterwards, Rita would take the stitching apart and redo it, or scrub the quilt real well because Rae Jean's hands were so dirty.

Walking into a fabric store in Bozeman with her mother in 1974, and being inspired by the colors, eighteen year old Rae Jean decided to make her first star quilt from beginning to end. She struggled along with it for about a month, having the most difficulty in lining up the points of the diamonds. She finally got help from her mother and learned the little tricks to sewing the pieces together. This was a taffeta quilt, the tattered one that Rita had shown me.

After her first quilt, Rae Jean ambitiously took orders for quilts to pay for a trip to Alaska. Not yet having mastered all the construction techniques, she was soon frustrated. Trying to get a quilt to lie flat on the quilting frame was the last straw. The quilt ended up in the garbage can, and Rae Jean stormed out of the house. When she came home from work the next day, her mother, sister, and aunt salvaged the quilt and were doing the last bit of the quilting. To Rae Jean's surprise, there was nothing wrong with the construction of the quilt. She was merely inexperienced when it came

to putting the quilt on a quilting frame.

Today, Rae Jean knows all the little tricks to making a quilt. Now, other quilters admire her handiwork and consult her when they have a problem putting a quilt together. She has developed shortcuts along the way and uses a cutting wheel and cutting board. This technique saves a significant amount of time spent cutting small quilt pieces. It takes Rae Jean less than an hour to do what Rita does with scissors in four or five hours. But Rita insists on sticking to her old ways of quilt making, while Rae Jean looks for ways to save time. No doubt, this is because Rae Jean works full-time as a secretary at the tribal Office, which leaves little time to work on quilts. She used to complete two quilts a month in her spare time, but has now cut back to making one a month. Rae Jean prefers to spend more time on one quilt and do a fine job, and not rush through many orders. She also makes star jackets to order, like her sister Judy.

Observing her surroundings is how Rae Jean puts together color combinations for her quilts. She remembers:

One day, I was sitting there working, just staring out in the middle of nowhere and I saw this really deep forest green color against brown dirt. I loved it and I said 'that would be a good quilt color'. So I did. It's really hard to find forest green in fabric, but you can always find brown. And it was. It was a beautiful quilt.

She prefers earthy tones, such as brown, green and peach, and only uses solid colored cotton/polyester blend material.

Unlike the other giveaway quilt makers that I interviewed, Rae Jean doesn't use the fan stitch on her quilts anymore. She believes that the fan stitch covers up the

star, so she stitches around the star and inside each diamond, along the seams. This way, the patchwork star is accented by the quilting stitches. In the corners, Rae Jean gets creative and quilts in flowers or star designs. She finds that a quilting hoop gives her more flexibility. It doesn't take up much room, it's portable, and it's easier for her to get close to the work.

In addition to making star quilts for the giveaways on the reservation, Rae Jean is looking for a market for her quilts off the reservation. She planned to go to Arizona to enter her star quilts in a quilt show and sale at the Heard Museum in Phoenix. During this annual exhibit, the quilts sell for \$500.00 to \$700.00, or three to four times what Rae Jean normally charges for a quilt on the reservation. Rae Jean wants to use 100% cotton for these quilts. In the corners of the quilts, she plans to experiment with fancy quilting in the form of tipis or horses, for example. If she sells one quilt it will pay for the trip and the excitement of the trip is more important to her than making a lot of money at this point in her life.

Meanwhile, Rae Jean is busy making quilts on the reservation for the traditional giveaways. She gets so many orders that it's hard for her to keep up. She works with her mother and sister on large orders, such as thirty quilts at a certain price for a memorial dinner. She noted:

It's usually just for the traditional things that we make them for. I sold maybe one or two to non-Indians, and that's it. Everybody says 'you charge too little, you charge too little'. I know some people will charge. For instance, I can make a regular size quilt and charge a hundred and seventy-five. Somebody else can make the same size quilt and charge three hundred. Some of the people that give them away can barely afford anything, and yet, they'll give everything to give one away. So, I don't want to charge.



Like Helen Boyd, Rae Jean is concerned about keeping the price of her quilts low so that friends and neighbors can afford to continue the giveaway tradition.

In the footsteps of her mother, Rae Jean's daughter Myrna, is heading off to college soon. But unlike her mother, she has no interest in making star quilts. She might discover quilting later, or she might not ever take an interest in quilting. If she wants to learn someday, there are three talented quilters in her family willing to teach her.

### **Marion Green, Chippewa**

Married to a white man, with four daughters and one son, Marion has lived in Wolf Point, Montana, all of her life. She's half French and half Chippewa and affiliated with the Turtle Mountain Tribe. She is not an enrolled member of the Fort Peck Reservation. She works part-time cleaning houses and also volunteers her time at the senior citizen in Wolf Point, where I interviewed her.

When Marion was about fourteen, she began quilting by helping her mother, who was always working on a quilt. Her mother never made any star quilts, but used patchwork patterns such as the "Double Wedding Ring", "Flower Basket", and "Log Cabin". Marion started making star quilts with a friend many years ago. Today, she makes more star quilts than any other kind of quilt. This includes "Lone Star", "Tulip Star", and "Broken Star" quilt patterns. Marion uses various other patchwork patterns, in addition to star patterns. She made the quilt on her bed, which is the applique pattern called "Grandmother's Fan". In addition, she makes her own applique patterns. Sources for inspiration might be a drawing in a coloring book which would be

enlarged and appliqued on to a baby quilt.

Around her busy schedule, Marion makes about one quilt a month. She takes orders for her quilts, usually star quilts, from family, friends, and anyone else wanting a handmade quilt. In most cases, these come with matching pillow shams. She added:

I got to take orders. That's the only way I'll do it because you make them and maybe it isn't the color scheme that they want. So, I just take orders.

On these custom orders, Marion will match up quilt colors to the wallpaper, curtains or paint in the room where the quilt will be used. A print is picked out first, and then the solid colors to go with it. She doesn't use a lot of different colors together, and prefers the pastel tones. She uses the cotton-polyester blend fabric that is popular on the reservation.

The quilting stitches outline the patchwork star in Marion's star quilts. Then she makes a design with the quilting in the solid areas. She finds that this technique enhances the star pattern. Sometimes she quilts "in the ditch" like Edna. If she isn't already working on something, Marion also does quilting for others, which is a high demand task, but pay is minimal.

One of Marion's daughters makes crazy quilts out of double knit material and then ties, never quilts them. To tie a quilt, yarn or string is looped through the quilt top, batting, and backing at regular intervals and then securely knotted. This process holds the layers of the quilt together and goes much faster than quilting. Marion's daughter has never tried making a star quilt or tried quilting one of her finished

blankets. Marion is the one that makes all the quilts for Christmas, birthday and wedding gifts in the family. She is making quilts for all her children and married grandchildren now. She showed me a beautiful baseball star quilt that she made for her grandson. He keeps the quilt in a trunk. She explained:

He was playing baseball for the Yellowjackets. The colors were yellow and black. I had a pale yellow background and the yellow and black in the center. I had my grandson's number up here, number six. In the octagon, I crossed bats. I had a baseball glove in the bottom of the quilt, in that octagon, with a baseball bat. And then, in each corner I had the yellowjackets.

The team ended up pitching in together and ordering a similar quilt from Marion for the coach with all the players names embroidered on it.

Whether a quilt is for someone in the family, or a custom order, Marion sews for the love of the craft. This is especially evident when she quilts a blanket made by another quilter. If she is not working on one of her own quilts, she wants to keep her fingers busy one way or the other.

### **Star Quilts: Giveaway Versus Non-Giveaway**

On Fort Peck Reservation, the star quilts made for traditional gift-giving or giveaway ceremonies are manufactured differently and have a function apart from star quilts made for private use or sold in gift shops. At a glance, all the star quilts might look the same, but the ones fabricated especially for giveaways are imbued with special meaning. A giveaway quilt is tribal art made for tribal use. According to Christian F. Feest, tribal art is "produced by members of tribal societies primarily for their own or their fellow members' use...to satisfy the material or spiritual needs of the tribesmen" (1980:14).

Quilters on the reservation not involved in native traditions have a preference for making star quilts because the star pattern is the dominant style in the area. Feest refers to this type of art as ethnic art, which is "produced by members of tribal societies primarily for the use of members of other groups, in the case of North America mainly for White Americans" (1980:14). Ethnic art is most importantly viewed as a way to make money while utilizing traditional skills. Art as a symbol of ethnic identity is of secondary importance, if a consideration at all. For tourists, a star quilt bought at a gift shop serves as a souvenir of a trip to the reservation.

The meaning of the star symbol as it applies to star quilts was not clear. None of the quilters that I spoke to knew what the symbol of the star meant, apart from the honor in giving or receiving a quilt. Helen Boyd believes the star is a symbol of being Indian, which seems to be very true today. Star quilts are draped over trucks pulling Indian floats in the Wolf Point Stampede parade. In Missoula, stars quilt are found as backdrops for an Indian fry bread booth at the International Food Festival and for a Native American drama performance.

Another inconsistency is that the criteria for a well made quilt was about the same for all the quilters, regardless of quilting quality of the quilter. When piecing the top, the diamond shapes that make up the star should match and lie flat. The individual diamonds should not be too large because a more intricate pattern results when more colors are placed side by side. Sybil Lambert never uses less than six diamonds across for each of the eight points of the star. The quilting stitches should be small, even, and done by hand.

These are the guidelines for making a quality quilt, but none of the quilters that I spoke with followed all of these. The diamonds didn't match perfectly on the quilts that Helen Boyd was trying to get done in a hurry. Edna Smith uses a sewing machine for the quilting around the borders. At the same time, Edna is critical of the workmanship on the star quilts made for giveaways. She complained:

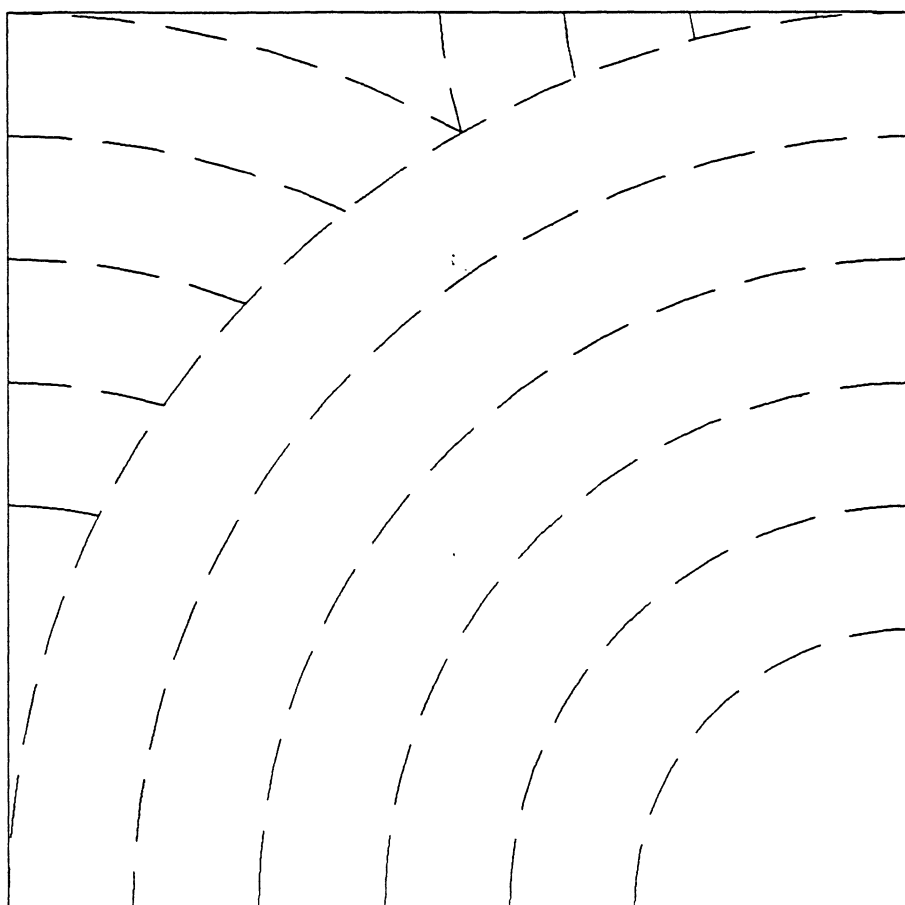
They're not making it for a market to sell. It's a gift, just giving it away. When they have to have fifteen, twenty or thirty quilts, they can't pay out for them and they're not too particular about how well they're made.

Actually, the problem is too great a demand for giveaway quilts. All of the quilters are concerned about the quality of their work, but the giveaway quilters are making four to ten times the number of quilts that fine quilters such as Edna Smith and Marion Green are making. The giveaway quilters don't have the time to put in ten or more stitches to the inch when there are eight quilts to do in one month. It is usually more like four or five stitches to the inch. I saw this especially evident with the giveaway quilt made by Edna Smith for her son on the occasion of his grandmother's memorial giveaway. Ordinarily, Edna's stitching is small and precise, but in this case, she made twenty quilts for this particular giveaway. I noticed that the quilting stitches on her son's quilt were the usual four or five to the inch, as on most giveaway quilts. The value of a quilt and what it symbolizes within the context of the giveaway becomes greater than the value of quality construction. Hence, giveaway quilts serving as tribal art have a different worth than quilts made for an outside market or personal use, even for picky quilters like Edna Smith.

On the Fort Peck Reservation, all giveaway star quilts are hand quilted, which

is considered more beautiful than machine stitching (the quilts of Almira Jackson are machine quilted only because of her arthritis). The fan stitch is the standard quilting pattern which was popular with white women in the 1930's (Figure V). According to Sybil Lambert, the popularity of the fan pattern was brought from South Dakota to the Fort Peck area by the wife of the Presbyterian minister, Reverend Red Lightening. The fan stitch is a quick pattern to quilt because the shape of the fan can be done in one sweep of the arm, without having to reposition the body. When everything is stitched within reach, the quilter then moves to the next section. There is never enough time for the quilters filling orders for giveaways, so it is not surprising that the fan pattern is the most popular quilting pattern on the reservation.

Cotton/polyester blend fabric was used by most of the quilters on the reservation, and preferred over the one hundred percent cotton. Edna Smith likes the fact that it doesn't wrinkle, Sybil Lambert believes the colors don't fade, and Rita Belgarde prefers the smooth feel of the blend. The local businesses that sell material stock only the cotton/polyester blend, in addition to the satin and taffeta. Specialty quilt shops in the larger cities stock only the pure cotton, which is expensive and generally runs two to three times as much as the cotton/polyester blends. Cherry Jacobson, one of the co-owners of Country Friends Quilt Shop in Missoula, is convinced that pure cotton fabric is softer, lasts longer and ages well, becoming more beautiful as the colors fade. But intense color is an important characteristic of a giveaway quilt, as is the rock bottom price. The cost of materials is a big consideration for the quilters interested in keeping the price as low as possible for



**Figure 5** Fan Stitch

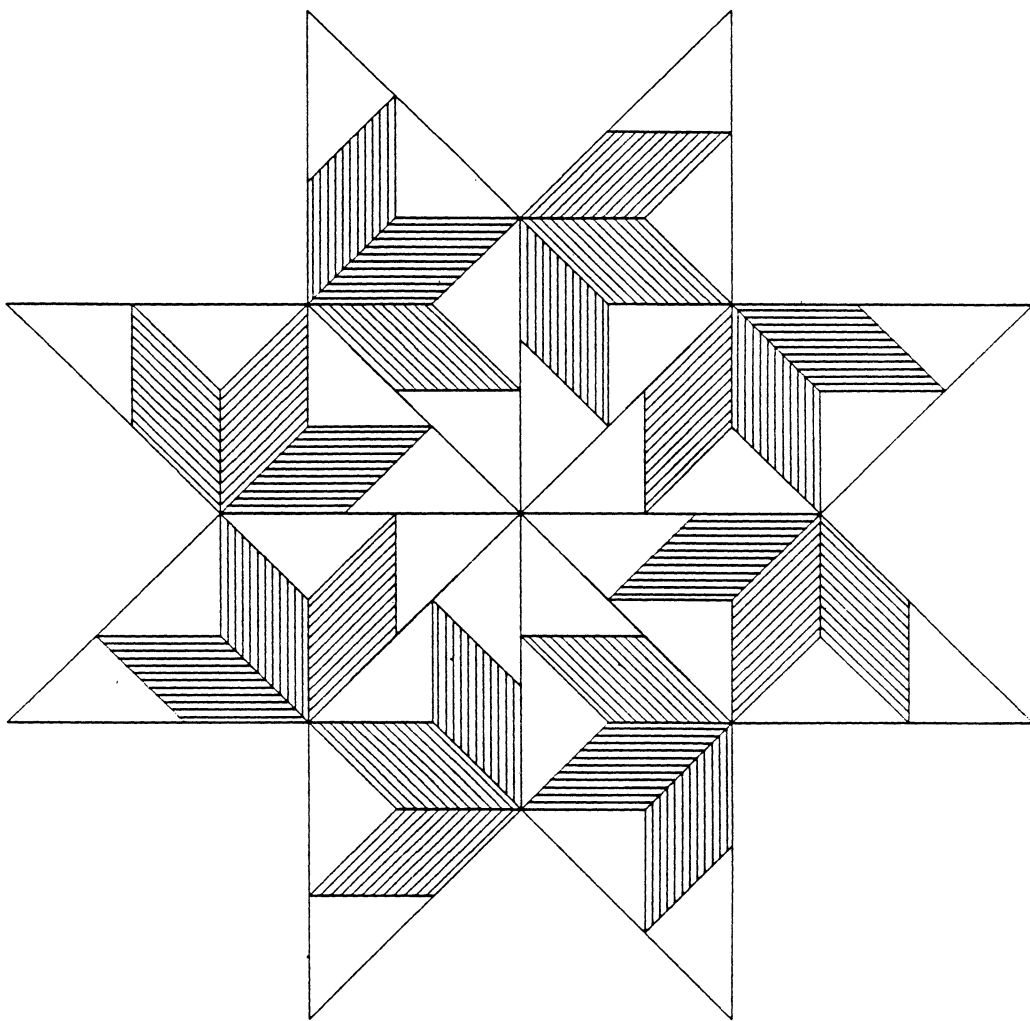
giveaway quilts.

The prices for a giveaway quilt range from \$125 - \$175 for a full size quilt. Helen Boyd charges the least, but her work wasn't as neat as Rae Jean Walking Eagle, who charges the most. Sybil Lambert charges \$125 for a star quilt, and doubles the price for a tourist. Most of the quilters involved in the giveaway tradition were concerned about keeping the prices of the quilts as low as possible. In addition to keeping the cost of materials down, very little money is charged for labor. The quilters give generously of their time to provide quilts to the community for giveaways. Quilting is tied to traditional values and the ethos of being Indian.

The quilters who are mainly filling orders for giveaway blankets are making six to eight star quilts a month. The patchwork star is the only pattern used, though in various forms, such as the "Lone Star", "Crazy Star", "Broken Star", "Warbonnet Star" (a warbonnet design applied on to a "Lone Star"), "Eagle Star" and "Sparrows In Flight" (Figure VI). None of the giveaway quilters that I spoke with owned one of their own quilts. If there was a star quilt in the house, it was one that was received as a gift, or in the case of Helen Boyd, made for her son in the service. The quilts received as gifts are well used and have a short life span. They are appreciated for their beauty, but in the case of tribal art, functionality is the "overriding criteria for any product" (Feest 1980:14). The symbol of honor and generosity in the form of a star quilt is not separate from its function as a blanket on Fort Peck Reservation.

With the giveaway quilts, there is clearly a preference for a bright star made from solid colored fabric with a white or light colored filler. Black is never used as a





**Figure 6** Sparrows in Flight

filler because of its association with death and evil. The flashier the quilt, the better, as evidenced in the bright colors and the shiny fabrics such as taffeta, satin, and lame. The choice of colors and fabrics comes from individual inspiration.

In contrast to the quilters making blankets for the giveaways, Edna Smith and Marion Green make star quilts, but never, or rarely for giveaways. The star is their favorite patchwork pattern, but they both use other patterns in addition to the star. Printed fabrics predominate in their quilts and sometimes pastel shades are used, or even preferred in Marion's case. They each make about a quilt a month, including ones for their own use. Most of the quilts are made as gifts for family members, though special orders are taken when extra time is available. Edna also makes quilts to sell in the gift shop in Wolf Point. Quilts made for their children are oftentimes not used, but stored in trunks, in the custom of non-natives on the reservation. A quilt becomes too valuable to use as a result of the labor involved in making one. This reflects the Western concept of 'art for art's sake' or art as "something separable from the rest of daily life" (Feest 1980:9). A quilt is viewed more as a non-utilitarian art object. It might be hung on the wall and admired for its beauty, or in the case of Edna's and Marion's children, they are carefully folded, wrapped and hidden away like a buried treasure.

Both Marion and Edna spend about a month on each quilt. Consequently, their quilting stitches are finer than the stitches on the giveaway blankets, and their prices are higher. Edna charges \$250 for a full-size quilt. This is still relatively inexpensive when compared to the price that Cherry Jacobson charges at Country Friends Quilt

Shop in Missoula. A machine quilted full-size "Lone Star" quilt, with nothing fancy, sells for \$600.

The fan stitch quilting pattern is rarely seen on a star quilt off the reservation. On the background, there are as many different quilting patterns as there are quilters, but in most cases, the quilting stitches go around the star to emphasize the form. Edna and Marion quilt the star in this manner, as does Rae Jean Walking Eagle. Rae Jean uses this method of quilting to enhance the star, but is also making fewer quilts than her counterparts, so time isn't as critical a factor for her. She is also planning to find a market for her quilts off the reservation and is current on contemporary quilting styles.

A "Lone Star" quilt show at Country Friends Quilt Shop in Missoula, August, 1993 gave me a chance to compare the style of giveaway star quilts made on Fort Peck Reservation with non-giveaway star quilts made in western Montana. There were seven quilts from around Missoula County in the exhibit and all but one were made with printed fabrics throughout. The quilt that had a solid colored star was filled in with printed material. Two other quilts had dark backgrounds, one forest green, the other black. All of the quilts were made with one hundred percent cotton fabric in fashionable prints and colors.

Only one quilt in the show was hand quilted. I asked Cherry Jacobson about this, and she said that most quilters are too anxious to get the blanket on the bed. They would rather quilt it on the sewing machine, as opposed to waiting the two or three months it would take to hand stitch one. Only a few meticulous quilters in the

Missoula area actually take the time to quilt something by hand, and then, this would be for their own use only. Cherry explained that the drawback to hand quilting is that a quilt becomes so precious as a result of the labor involved, that no one wants to use it. The extra labor would elevate the quilt from the realm of utilitarian craft work to that of nonfunctional fine art. This is in contrast to a giveaway quilt which is tribal art for tribal use.

In summary, the quilts made on the Fort Peck Reservation for the giveaways are characterized by a cotton/polyester blend, taffeta, or satin fabric. Invariably the quilt has a patchwork star. Different star patterns are seen, but the "Lone Star" is the most prevalent. The patchwork star is usually made from bright solid colored material, filled in with a solid, light colored background. The piecing is done by machine, but the quilting is stitched by hand in the fan pattern, with four to five stitches to the inch.

The function of the star quilt in traditional gift-giving or in the giveaway ceremony is more important than precise construction techniques. Star quilts are fabricated to be given away with their function as tribal art in mind, and not as non-utilitarian art objects. Even though these quilts are appreciated for their artistic qualities, they have a greater value in serving as a blanket and as a symbol of ethnic identity. In contrast, the quilts made by non-giveaway quilters stylistically look very similar to giveaway quilts but lack the symbolism defined by the culture. The quilts are made for family gifts, personal use, or to sell in a local gift shop. They might not even be used as blankets, but admired as works of art.

## THE GIVEAWAY

Star quilts are distributed as gifts at giveaway ceremonies throughout the year on Fort Peck Reservation. Giveaways are public affairs that demonstrate the traditional value of generosity. Consequently, generosity is tied to cultural identity and the present day concept of "Indianness".

The four great virtues for men in traditional Sioux society were bravery, generosity, strength, and wisdom. The ideal woman was brave, generous, truthful, and a mother. Bravery and generosity were virtues aspired to by all. A generous family was rewarded with respect and prestige. "To accumulate property for its own sake was disgraceful, while to be unable to acquire wealth merely pitiable. The ownership of things was important only as a means to giving, and blessed was the man that had much to give" (Hassrick 1964:36). Gift-giving took place in the form of a hunter sharing his kill with the sick and elderly, or on a larger scale, in a giveaway ceremony in someone's honor where beaded items, buffalo robes, and horses were given away to friends and the needy. The man's position within the society "depended upon his ability to give away large amounts of goods", therefore, "the woman's contribution was vital to his status and prestige" (Schneider 1983: 114). She was the one that made the beadwork and tanned the buffalo robes.

Wealth didn't bring honor unless it was shared. This is in sharp contrast to Euro-american society where honor comes from the retention of wealth. In Sioux society, the wealthiest families were the ones that gave the most away. In some cases, amassing wealth to keep instead of giving away was considered a crime on the same

level as adultery and murder (Hassrick 1964:17). The accumulation of possessions was not compatible with the true Sioux way of life and the tribe was suspicious of anyone who guarded his riches over a lifetime. "As they say, death visits all families; then why all these riches? Accumulations of goods imply that the owner values material objects more than kin. Such a person is greedy. Such a person has no prestige in the tribe" (Mirsky 1937:387).

The most honorable form of generosity was to give to people too poor to reciprocate (Albers & Medicine 1983:132). This practice served as a leveling device so that large disparities of wealth didn't exist within traditional Sioux society. The circulation of property also created "social solidarity between or with societies by fostering alliances and promoting interdependence" (Grobsmith 1979:123). It was understood that one who received a gift would return a gift or favor at a later date, except in the case of the poor and infirm. In addition to the benefits derived from giving, the mobile way of life was not conducive to the accumulation of objects.

Life transitions were usually acknowledged by a ceremony followed with a feast and a giveaway. Horses, leather goods, buffalo robes, beadwork, and other goods were amassed over a period of time to be distributed at the giveaway. "To attain an office of authority, it was necessary to perform ceremonies involving certain life crises, particularly puberty and death" (Hassrick 1964:297). These transitions in life were usually acknowledged with a ceremony followed with a feast and giveaway, such in the naming ceremony for a young child or in the case of adoption, the Hunka, or Buffalo ceremony. The Buffalo ceremony was performed in honor of a daughter in

transition between childhood and womanhood. As soon as possible after her first menses when there were enough provisions, her family would have the ceremony, followed with feasting and gifts. "The social prestige of the woman is in proportion to the number of guests, the amount of the feast and the prodigality of the giving at this ceremony which is her debut as a woman" (Walker 1980:243). Not all families could afford to give their daughters the Buffalo ceremony, in which case, a young woman could make up for the lack of prestige by being industrious or exceptionally artistic.

After the death of a loved one, the families who could afford it showed their devotion to the departed by adhering to the ritual of Spirit-keeping. This process lasted about a year, during which time the spirit was kept in a small pouch. It was brought out everyday and fed, then at night, returned to a special lodge known as a ghost lodge. During this year, the women in the family made goods such as buffalo robes, moccasins, and dresses which were accumulated, along with horses. At the end of the mourning period, there was a memorial feast followed by a huge giveaway in honor of the deceased. Sometimes a family gave away everything that they owned. After the giveaway, the spirit bundle was unwrapped and the soul was sent on its way to the Spirit Road, otherwise known as the Milky Way.

In addition to Spirit-keeping, there were other events that might warrant a giveaway. These included a hunter's first kill, a warrior's return from a successful raid or battle, initiation into a secret society, in honor of a dancer in the Sun Dance, or the recognition of some other honor or achievement.

In an attempt to assimilate the Sioux, giveaways became illegal when the

courts of Indian offenses were established in accordance to government regulation in 1883. However, giveaways continued to be practiced. Another threat to the giveaway tradition took place in the 1950s when young people began to lose interest. "The fact that many of the younger Dakota feel embarrassed and ashamed of the ceremony suggests that it will disappear within a couple of generations" (Hurt 1952:3). Fortunately, the giveaway and gift-giving have become an act of Sioux identity and there is now a renewed interest in following this tradition.

Giveaways continue with many of the Plains Indian tribes today as an expression of one's generosity. As before, giveaways serve an economic purpose in that a support system is developed and sustained through the exchange of gifts which act as insurance in the event of need. More importantly, the giveaway now serves a social function that "not only draws people into a critical social network, but it also serves as a true identity marker in that it separates what is considered 'Indian' today from the surrounding non-Indian society" (Grobsmith 1981:75).

The Buffalo ceremony is rarely performed now, but giveaways or gift-giving are still performed for adoptions, memorials, warriors returning from the service or basketball courts, naming ceremonies, Sun Dance participants, and other honorific ceremonies, such as election into office, graduation from high school, or serving as a powwow official. A family sponsors a giveaway to honor a relative or to thank the community for an honor received. Prestige is gained in giving and participation of family members "publically symbolizes the unity of the kin group" (Weist 1973:102).

Once the most prestigious item to give or receive, horses are rarely seen at



giveaways today because they are expensive and no longer necessary for hunting and travel. Among the Sioux, the star quilts are now the most valuable item in a giveaway pile, replacing the important function of buffalo robes as ceremonial objects and functional blankets. Once again, function is an important component of tribal art. On the Fort Peck Reservation, a giveaway pile consists of from three to twenty-five star quilts, as well as numerous Pendleton wool blankets, sheet sets, patchwork star pillows, acrylic blankets, and towels. The giveaway pile mostly consists of bedding materials. Other tribes and reservations have their own distinctive giveaway items, such as kitchen goods with the Northern Cheyenne (Weist 1973:98).

A giveaway is a family affair, although the organization of the event is the responsibility of the mother or grandmother. She "determines all of the gifts to be given away and supervises their manufacture if they are home-made items such as quilts and shawls, or supervises the purchase of store bought items" (Powers 1982:273). She also decides who is to receive something and what the gift will be. Women make or buy with their earnings almost everything at a giveaway, including the most prestigious items, the star quilts (Albers 1977:214). In the case of Loretta Bear Cub, she made all of the star quilts that were given away in the name of her family. When I interviewed her, she was in the process of making and accumulating quilts for her brother's memorial giveaway and feast, in between filling other quilt orders.

Today, giveaways are an integral part of the numerous powwow celebrations held every summer on the Fort Peck Reservation. The afternoons are filled with

dancing and giveaways all weekend long. Goods are paraded around the arena, placed in a pile, then given away one item at a time, beginning with the star quilts which are placed on top of the pile. The giveaway star quilts are now symbols for public expressions of generosity.

### **Basketball Game Giveaways**

The star quilt giveaway ceremony at high school basketball tournaments on reservations in northeastern Montana originated in Brockton in 1964, after an incident in 1947. Star quilter Sybil Lambert and her husband Barney remember the 1947 basketball game where Dennis Blount was playing for the Brockton Warriors against their mighty rivals, the Poplar Indians. During a time-out, Blount's grandmother, Tessie Four Times, came and stood behind him. She wiped the sweat off his back with a shawl, then proceeded to throw the shawl onto the gym floor. A member of the audience, Phoebe Jones, came down and picked up the shawl, which was now hers to keep. Mrs. Jones shook hands with Dennis, recognizing that his grandmother was honoring him by giving the shawl away. The Brockton Warriors won this game and were accused of using "Indian Medicine" to do it.

Mrs. Four Times' action during the basketball game was based on the tradition of honoring warriors going into or coming from battle. She was proud of her grandson and gave the shawl away in his honor. Anyone understanding this could have picked up the shawl and kept it. In this case it was Mrs. Jones.

This incident was talked about for seventeen years on the reservation and viewed as a unique event. Then in 1964, The Red Eagle Memorial Presbyterian

Ladies Group and the community of Fort Kipp discussed the tradition of honoring warriors. Virginia Spotted Bear came up with the idea of giving away star quilts to honor the players (new warriors) on the Brockton basketball team during tournaments every year.

The first of such ceremonies was held in February, 1964, in Sidney, Montana during half-time of the last game for the Class C District Tournament. The members of the Brockton team carried star quilts into the gymnasium, which they then spread out on the floor. The quilts were presented to coaches, players on the other team, or spectators. The Brockton team made it to the Divisional and State Class C Tournaments that year, where the ceremony was repeated both times.

This custom is now a regular part of the basketball tournaments for boys and girls on the Fort Peck Reservation. In addition to the basketball players, the cheerleaders and managers started giving away star quilts in the early 1970's. There are ten players, two alternates, four cheerleaders and two managers for a total of as many as eighteen star quilts per team presented during half-time.

The player being honored decides to whom the quilt will go. The emcee calls the name of the individual to receive the quilt. They step forward and the quilt is wrapped around their shoulders. When they leave, the next one is called forward, and so forth.

The Brockton Warriors went to the state basketball tournament in Billings, February 1992, and brought their star quilts with them. During half-time the quilts were laid out on the gym floor, to the astonishment of the Billings audience.

Unfamiliar with the tradition, a man sitting next to Sybil and Barney Lambert wanted to know where he could buy a raffle ticket for one of those quilts.

During basketball tournament time, quilters on the Fort Peck Reservation are extremely busy making star quilts. If the local team wins, as many as eighteen quilts are needed before the next tournament, in one to two weeks time. If the team makes it all the way to the championship, as many as fifty-four quilts are needed before the tournament games are over. A quilter takes care of all the demands for basketball giveaway quilts within her family first and accepts additional orders only if time allows.

The giveaway tradition continues in contemporary Sioux society, with some changes in its form and function. Once an economic leveling device, the giveaway today is more a social affair and platform for the affirmation of traditional culture and one's ethnic identity. Star quilts have now replaced horses as the most prestigious item at a giveaway, though blankets, and earlier, buffalo robes, were always an important part of a giveaway pile. Some ceremonies, such as the Buffalo ceremony, are rarely performed these days, but new ceremonies have been created, as seen in the example of the basketball tournament giveaways. In some cases, money is beginning to replace goods at a giveaway. Almira Jackson believes this is because the ceremony goes quicker and the dancers don't have to sit around and stiffen up.

Inflation is another reason that the demand for star quilts has increased over the past thirty years. "In contrast to the past, when honorific giving involved no expectation of return, reciprocity is now expected" (Albers & Medicine 1983:131). To

keep up with increasing obligations, many families find it necessary to increase the size and value of their giveaway piles. Where once two or three star quilts were sufficient, there are now ten to twenty. In any case, the giveaway ceremony continues to be an important part of Sioux culture and the demand for star quilts on Fort Peck Reservation will most likely continue to grow in the years to come.

## CONCLUSION

Artistic designs and craft materials were fluid in past traditional Sioux culture, as they are today. Before the arrival of the whites, the Indian tribes on the Plains traded ideas and objects among themselves. The white traders brought metal, beads, cloth, and other things. In response, traditional designs were adapted to new materials, such as the replacement of quillwork by beadwork during the 19th century. More recently, as in the case of the star quilt, traditional native symbology (the star) has been transposed onto a traditionally Euro-american craft (quilting).

Whereas once a Plains Indian women gained recognition for her abilities to bead and tan leather (Schneider 1983:109), today a woman on the Fort Peck Reservation brings prestige and wealth to her family by her abilities as a quilter. Women's labor plays an important part in the social and political organization on the reservation, as evidenced by the star quilt industry. Generosity is the key to any prominent position, and an abundance of star quilts is required over the course of a lifetime. Although more men are in power politically, their status is dependent on the abilities of the women in their families to organize the giveaways and to make or pay for all the star quilts. The production of star quilts strengthens social relations and is correlated to the use and maintenance of power on the reservation. This concurs with Jane Schneider's attempt "to relate cloth production to the mobilization of power" (1987:409).

The Native American star quilt is a material manifestation of the consolidation of kinship bonds. This is seen in the giving of star quilts as gifts within the family.

A new child is welcomed into a family with a star quilt; as a wedding present, a star quilt serves as a binding tie between two families; and the connection to preceding generations is affirmed when a body is laid to final rest within a star quilt. From birth to beyond death, the star quilt is a symbol for the connecting thread between generations.

A strong kinship bond is also evidenced in the mother/daughter relationship during the star quilt construction process. Needle and thread in hand, a young girl is encouraged to imitate her mother on the corner of a quilt. Later, when more experienced, she comes to her mother's assistance getting out large orders and amassing quilts for a family giveaway, especially when time is a critical factor. On the Fort Peck Reservation, the giveaway quilters do not work together in quilting bees, but work alone, or with their daughters.

The star quilt is tribal art produced by one tribal member for another. In order to make star quilts accessible to all in need of giveaway quilts, the quilters keep their prices as low as possible. The giveaway is a public expression of generosity, a traditional value; to support giveaways is to promote traditional values. The income from making star quilts is vital for the existence of women like Rita Belgarde. But the traditional way of life is more important than money, so Rita keeps her prices low. Anyone who needs to organize a giveaway can afford to buy a quilt from her.

In addition to consolidating social relations, cloth conveys values and a sense of identity (Schneider 1987:412). In Sioux and Assiniboine country, the star quilt is a symbol for traditional values because of its association with generosity and the

giveaways. The eight-pointed patchwork star is also fast becoming an ethnic identity marker for all Indians. In western Montana, star quilts are used as backdrops in Native American presentations or events and worn by powwow dancers, regardless of tribal affiliation. This illustrates that the borrowing of tribal images is an ongoing process.

Quilters make important contributions to the ceremonial life on Fort Peck Reservation. The giveaway ceremony, traditionally a means of distributing wealth, is now an important social institution and star quilts are the most prestigious items to give. Other ceremonial uses for star quilts are as a shroud in funerals, and as a backdrop at wakes. Honor or achievement awards in the form of star quilts are presented to graduating college students, returning service men and women, and respected doctors in the community, among others.

The basketball tournament star quilt giveaways began on the Fort Peck Reservation as a way of honoring the "new" warrior. Today, the high school basketball teams on the Fort Belknap Reservation have star quilt giveaways in the style of those on Fort Peck Reservation. The demand for star quilts in Montana will increase in the years to come as the giveaway tradition changes and expands in scope. At the same time, inflation will require more quilts for each giveaway pile persuading young women to learn to quilt from their mothers. If money does not eventually replace giveaway goods, as Almira Jackson fears it might, then giveaway star quilts will be manufactured on Fort Peck Reservation as long as the tradition of giving remains a great honor in tribal culture.



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