

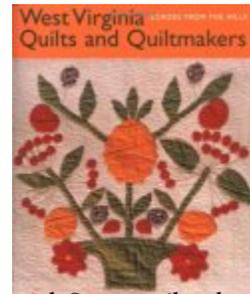
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Fawn Valentine. *West Virginia Quilts and Quiltmakers: Echoes from the Hills*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000. 282 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1340-1.

Reviewed by Rebecca Tolley-Stokes (East Tennessee State University)  
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Although “make it do, wear it out, use it up, do without” was not quite the mantra of my youth, I heard it often enough from my grandparents that I easily identified with the West Virginia quilter’s ethic of making do; using pieces from every scrap of cloth available to assemble quilt tops. Valentine writes “Quilts and Quiltmaking play an important role in West Virginia’s cultural identity. The concept of ‘making do’ with materials at hand fits the character of the independent Mountaineer” (p. 6). Though West Virginia quilt makers followed national trends in pattern selection and fabric choices, data from the West Virginia Heritage Quilt Search (WVHQ) reveal several unique pattern preferences, construction techniques, and ethnic distinctions, yet firmly places them within a regional context; the Southern Highlands south of the Mason-Dixon line.

Inspired by the Kentucky Quilt Project, the WVHQ presents many of the 4,000 quilts made before 1940 and their supporting documentation. Most entries include photographs of the quilt makers, but all include biographical information. Valentine’s skillfully written portraits of each woman’s life make for easy, engaging, and enriched reading as she renders her subject unforgettable.

In preparing a digital record of the WVHQ findings, volunteers keyed the data and eventually created a master database. Included in the first of several appendices, information summaries providing demographic and quilt data allow insight into the research methodology. Valentine’s convincing use of material culture methodology firmly situates quilts within the historical record while focusing intellectual attention upon the validity of women’s contributions.

Remaining popular long after the national trend,

West Virginian (WV) quilters created Crazy quilts that were the most common design found in the study. Valentine speculates that crazy quilts flourished in WV because their quick construction appealed to women who had little previous experience with piecework. Valentine cites “wives of immigrant laborers in the coal industry or rural women who lacked exposure to the needlecraft artistry of precise patchwork” as the prevailing force behind the crazy quilt’s popularity in WV (p. 4). Finding two Log Cabin-Crazy hybrids in adjacent counties, Valentine states “The Log Cabin-Crazy quilt hybrid is not recognized as a national trend, but seems to have found fruitful soil in West Virginia” (p. 5).

Including only three quilts made by African-American women, the book focuses on quilts constructed by white women of various cultural descent: English, German, Irish, Scots, Dutch and French. Settled predominantly by Scots-Irish immigrants, their WV descendants show a preference for using an all over design known as fans, which is made by tracing rows of concentric arcs across the surface. Quilters with German heritage used obvious borders and were more likely to apply various quilting designs for different areas of the quilt top. Additionally, quilters of German descent were also adamant in maintaining symmetry and balance within the design. Conversely, quilters of Scots-Irish descent arranged fabric sequentially while rejecting symmetrical balance. Generally however, WV quilt makers retained the older use of hemming the quilt rather than applying a binding. Quilters in southern WV joined their block in a zigzag manner known as fencerow that is uncommon elsewhere but most likely Welsh in origin. Data also revealed that the favorite pattern of 19th century quilters was the Princess Feather appliqué design.

Rich in content and quality, this book adds much to existing quilt scholarship while providing a much-needed overview of WV quilts and quilt makers. Not only an excellent resource for various patterns, techniques, and aesthetics particular to WV, the book's appendices include an index of quiltmakers registered with the WVHQ, a list of annual quilt exhibitions in WV, an essay describing the Fairmont State College Textile Bags Collection by Beth Thorne Newcome and Joanna S. Nesselroad, national, WV, and women's history time lines, an essay on quilt care, and the author's notes. The index is average but will suffice for most readers' purposes.

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