

The Quilt Detective: Clues in Techniques

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Part 6) Tied Comforters & Unquilted Tops

The theme is alternatives to quilting such as tying, summer spreads & two-sided quilts.

Week #24) Tied Comforters Before 1875

To tie a quilt, the seamstress sandwiches the patchwork top, batting and backing. She then threads loops of yarn through all three layers, securing the yarn with a knot. Tying a quilt top to its back and batting takes far less time than quilting---less time than even the most basic utility quilting. The economics of tying a quilt or a comforter, as tied quilts are called, appealed to women making covers for warmth and economy.

Early Tied Comforters. Very few tied quilts survive from the decades before 1875. A tied comforter made of banners from the 1844 presidential campaign is attributed to the years soon after the election. Fragments of a tied whole-cloth comforter attributed to the mid-1850s are in the collection of the Kansas Museum of History. Both are tied on the top in an unusual manner with circles of cloth behind each knot, presumably to prevent the ties from slipping through. Although neither is dated, fabrics and family history indicate a reliable pre-1860 date.

In my national database of 1,000 date-inscribed quilts I found 51 examples of tied comforters, only two of which were dated before 1875. These may have been date-inscribed tops, tied decades after they were made.

Dating comforters illustrates the limitations of drawing conclusions based on surviving date-inscribed examples. Lowly utility comforters were rarely signed or dated. Comforters, because they were made for use rather than show, may be one of the quilt styles that didn't survive in any quantity. Yet, most quilt historians have seen enough tied comforters to estimate that tying is a strong clue to a post-1875 date.



Detail of a top made of blocks featuring Prussian blue rainbow stripes and Turkey red mignonettes that looks to have been pieced between 1850 and 1865. The top is quite worn. The Turkey red is streaking from wear and fracturing. The madder browns in the blue stripes are also fracturing. Many seams are ripped. The top was once a tied comforter. If you look closely at the intersection of the four blocks (below the blue star I added) you'll see puckers and a hole, evidence of a tie that's been removed.

Do we have here a tied comforter made before the Civil War? Or was it a top tied at a later date? Evidence in other parts of the quilt lead me to believe it was tied between 1880 and 1920. One tie remains, a gold wool yarn, typical of the later period. The backing fabric still attached is a loosely woven off-white muslin that is a common early-20th-century back.

Written References. Published instructions and personal records in diaries and letters before 1875 include references to tied quilts, called comforts and comfortable at the time. An 1853 estate inventory in Pennsylvania lists "lots of quilts and comforts," an assumed distinction between tied and quilted bedding. An 1842 Pennsylvania inventory listed 16 comfortable selling for 28 cents to \$1 and a single quilt worth \$2. Eliza Leslie's 1846 book on housekeeping, *The House Book*, described "soft, thick quilts used as a substitute for blankets and laid under the bedspread...a thick comfortable may be found a convenient substitute for a mattress." Again, we assume the "thick comfortable" is a tied bedcovering, but she gave instructions for making comfortable, describing not a tied, but a quilted cover. "You need not attempt to take close short stitches." It may be that the word "comfortable" or "comfort" referred at that time to a heavy or thick quilt as well as a tied piece.

References exist to the tied comforter as we know it. Myra Inman Carter wrote in her diary in 1861: "Pretty day. Tacked a comfort this morning." Fiction writer George Washington Harris described Mrs. Yardley's quilting party in the 1850's. She had "three quilts and one cumfort to tie." Civil War nurse Kate Cumming was disgusted with the bedding in Confederate hospitals where freedwomen were

employed "quilting comforts...they are tacked about a foot apart; when washed they are not fit to use."

In 1853, Lucy Rutledge Cooke wrote her sister that she was pulling three "comforters to pieces" for washing before her journey west. She was presumably snipping the ties so she could wash the top and the white backing ("which was filthy dirty") and re-tie them before packing them. "So glad to have clean and sweet bed clothes again."

Why the discrepancy between the surviving examples and the written records? Have we lost a quantity of tied comforters from quiltmaking's first one hundred years? This may be the case, for a number of reasons.

1) Tied bedding is more likely to be used and used up than fancier quilted pieces.

2) Tying makes a bedcover that is less stable than a quilted piece. The patchwork top shifts and pulls without quilting's reinforcement. Under hard use the patchwork pulls to pieces.

3) The Civil War consumed many quilts. In her study of quilts donated to comfort Union soldiers, Virginia Gunn estimates that 125,000 quilts and comforters were distributed by the Sanitary Commission (the Red Cross of the era.) Bedding was made specifically for soldiers, but the Sanitary Commission also asked for used blankets and comforters. One would guess that donors were most likely to offer tied bedding rather than more valuable quilted pieces. Very little bedding returned from the War.

4) Tied bedding was taken apart for cleaning as in Lucy Rutledge Cooke's description. After snipping the ties and pulling off the binding (some of which she reused in another project), she reassembled her three comforters. Many women laid aside the patchwork top and sandwiched a new top to the cleaned backing and batting because the old top was worn. In September, 1944, a reader of *Good Housekeeping* sent instructions for making wool filled comforters, with tops of "satine, silk, silkoline or old-fashion patchwork, as suits your taste or pocket. The wool filling will outlast more than one cover."

The standard cleaning technique was described in 1985 by New Mexico quilters who remembered "removing the wool batting from the inside of some of the heavier quilts...They washed the wool separately, dried it and then spread it over the lining before securing the top, batting and lining again with knots." Many of the surviving, worn patchwork tops stitched before 1875 were once comforters. Look for evidence of tying with fragments of yarn or holes in the fabric where ties once were.

Week #25) Terms For Tied Quilts

Today we use the word "comforter" to describe tied bedding, but there are many regional variations on the word. *The Dictionary of Regional English* surveyed people around the country at the end of the twentieth century and found two of the nineteenth-century terms, "comfortable" and "comfort," still in use as synonyms for the standard "comforter." Their researchers also heard the words "hap" and "puff."

Hap. Hap is a regional term found in Pennsylvania and the central east coast areas. Jeannette Lasansky, researching quilts in Union County, Pennsylvania in the 1980s, heard the word often as a synonym for what would be called a comforter elsewhere. She found "hap" defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as Northern English dialect for a covering, "generally applied to one of coarse material." British quilt historian Dorothy Osler found the term in use in Northumberland and Scotland to mean wool quilts and coarse coverings pieced of used clothing, mill ends and blankets. She believes the word to be "a shortened version of the word "happin or happen used...for centuries to mean a warm covering of some kind." Lasansky concludes that hap is regional English dialect that emigrated to America where it remains as a regional word.

"Hap" is considered to be a part of today's Pittsburgh dialect known as Pittsburghese. The *Wikipedia*, the on-line Encyclopedia, states authoritatively (in 2005): "A tied quilt is called a hap," a definition narrow enough that one can assume the writer is from Pittsburgh, where apparently a tied quilt *is* called a hap.

Sougans. Lasansky also researched quilts in New Mexico where people called comforters by a variety of names including "britches quilts," "hunting quilts," camp quilts" "cabin quilts" "fishing quilts," and "suggans." The term, also spelled "sougans," is used throughout the Southwest for simple, tied comforters, frequently pieced of wool or denim rectangles, and viewed as bedding for cowboys out on the range. Sougans are often pieced in the brickwork pattern, cut from a single rectangular shape, a style particularly popular from about 1900 to 1925. Sougans in that design and a few others tend to date from about 1900 to the recent past.

Suzanne Yabsley, interviewing women in 1980 for her book *Texas Quilts, Texas Women*, talked to a quilter who recalled that sougans were made from old wool pants, khakis, blue jeans and "tailor squares," by which she probably meant wool samples. An old cowboy told Yabsley that the tops were stitched by women, but the cowboys often helped tie their own sougans. Dorothy Zopf interviewed women in New Mexico and Colorado and also heard about sougans, some of which were pieced by the cowboys themselves.

Spelling variations include "suggins" and "soogins," generally pronounced with the emphasis on the first syllable, which sometimes has a long O like Sue and sometimes a short U to rhyme with bug. My old *Webster's Dictionary* from the 1930s says the word is derived from a Gaelic word for hand-twisted rope. The

Oxford English Dictionary, the authority for word origins, suggests it comes from a Scottish word for cover, as Osler noted.

Another possible word origin is the German word for comforter cover or *duvets*, (our common French term.) When I overheard German quilters talking about a cover for a feather comforter they used a word that sounds like "bezoogan," the plural form of the word Bezüge, which also means a "covering." It's only a short leap from the German Bezüge to the Texas word "sougan."

Robes. About the turn of the last century, mail-order catalogs featured large-scale prints they called robe prints, mentioning their suitability for quilts and comforters. In one of their early catalogs Montgomery Ward sold "Robe prints for comforters" in 1876. The last reference I found to the term was the 1917 Sears, Roebuck and Company catalog. The word seems to have meant a wholecloth comforter, generally tied. While a "robe" to us means clothing, such as a bath robe, we still use the term lap robe for a covering.

Britches Quilts. Britches quilts, rather than being a specific pattern, are comforters made of recycled clothing. From about 1880 through 1950, quilts were made of the heavy woolens used for men's suits and pants. Deanna Williams, who grew up in eastern Arkansas, told Kansas folklorist Jennie Chinn that she learned as a child to make wool comforters, her family's only bedding, by cutting up old pants into squares of fabric. She implied that these quilts were quilted rather than tied. Lillian Harrington told Chinn that as a child she made tied britches quilts of used pants with an old blanket as the filler. Both women were African-American, but the term seems to be common with Southerners of various ethnicity. It's found in places like Kansas where people brought Southern traditions with them.

In their survey of rural New Mexico's quilts in the 1980s, Nora Pickens and Jeannette Lasansky found that quilts made of fabrics "too heavy, too textured, or too rough for use in nice quilts" were most often called Britches quilts, but also called camp quilts, meant for use outside. Quiltmakers traditionally had used fabric cut from trouser legs of denim or wool, but were making them of double knits in the 1980s. One interviewee told them, "You can make and tack a camp quilt in one day."



Comforter cover with a linsey quilt inside. It's rare to find something valuable inside a comforter. The cotton comfort on the left had holes in the patchwork showing that a striped linsey quilt inside it instead of batting. I removed the binding and ties to reveal a heavy quilt---a quilted comfort---pieced possibly of home-woven linsey (cotton and wool combination fabric.) These quilts were made in the Southern border states, Tennessee, Missouri and Kentucky, up to about 1875. They wear like iron, although some of the off-white cottons in this one have a pink cast because of dye bleeding. Usually the quilt inside a quilt is so worn that it's not worth revealing, but linsey is so durable that the older quilt is in better shape than the cotton comforter cover dating from 1890-1910.

Is a Comforter Tied or Quilted? All these words for comforter seem to refer to bedding that might be quilted as well as tied. For example, the Kansas state fair in 1910 had a class for a "silk comforter, quilted or tacked." The major distinctions between a comforter and a quilt, or a hap and a quilt, or a sougan and a quilt seem to be thickness. Comforters, haps and sougans are thick, warm, heavy quilts made for warmth and not for show, a distinction illustrated by an 1886 reference to "soft quilts" as a synonym for comforter, a term quilt historian Erma Kirkpatrick found in her study of the magazine *Progressive Farmer*.

In the Kansas Quilt Project survey we hoped to confirm our observations that thicker quilts, like tied quilts, tend to date from about 1875 to 1950. We devised a gauge to measure whether a quilt was *thick, thin or in between* and passed each quilt through it. About 65% of the quilts were thin and only 5.5% were thick. We decided those numbers couldn't tell us anything about age but did point out the relatively small number of warm utility quilts we saw compared to what we believed to be out there. Our major conclusion: People who bring quilts for documentation usually show their fancier examples.

Week #26) Tied Quilts & Quilt Tops 1875-1950

Surviving tied quilts tend to date from after 1875 as the fashion for foundation patchwork developed. Tying was commonly used on Log Cabins and Crazy Quilts, probably because the extra piece of foundation fabric behind the patchwork added bulk, motivating quiltmakers to abandon quilting. The popularity of tied Log Cabins and Crazy Quilts may have given tying new status and given quiltmakers a new option for all their quilt styles. One indication of the increased status is the Wilson County, Kansas, fair's 1892 category for a "cotton comforter." The Kansas state fair in 1910 had a class for "cotton comforter" and one for "silk comforter, quilted or tacked."

Once the fads for Crazy Quilts and Log Cabins faded, tying was reduced to a technique suitable only for utility bedding, made primarily to keep people warm. One indication of tied quilt's low status is their omission from museum collections. Although their databases must contain several examples, a search [in 2005] of the Quilt Index and the International Quilt Study Center's on-line collections found no examples under the keyword "tied." Words like "tied" and "comforter" aren't even mentioned in the browsing terms.



Two comforters tied on the front with decorative ties. Below a wool nine-patch tied with yellow wool yarn; at top, a cotton plaid with ties of blue and white cotton thread twisted together for a little added color.

Techniques for Tying. The two words most commonly used for the technique today are "tying" and "tacking, with "tufting" sometimes heard. *Good Housekeeping* magazine in March, 1882 gave instructions for tying and tufting, two different steps in the process. "Cut a pasteboard four inches square for a marker, and at each point of the square dot with a lead pencil indicating where to tie...Tie at these places with tidy cotton and tuft with Germantown yarn or zepher (sic)." As to yarn: "pink and blue make up prettily, but scarlet is more durable than any other color."

The instructions are rather minimal, but detailed enough for the needleworker of the era. It seems that the cotton ties secured the quilt. The quiltmaker then threaded several loops of Germantown (wool) yarn and snipped them to a uniform length. The yarn would fuzz and make a tuft of color.

Comforters covered with these yarn pom-poms or multicolored ribbon rosettes fit perfectly into the late-Victorian aesthetic that valued a busy surface. On some quilts, however, the ties were discreetly secured on the back. On many Crazy Quilts and fancy Log Cabins they are almost invisible.

Ties were often knotted on the front with small knots or bows with all types of cotton, wool and silk yarn and threads. Children of the Great Depression remember saving the string pulled from feedsack seams to tack comforters.

In 1986, *Quilters' Newsletter Magazine* gave instructions for "a faster way to tie a quilt [by making] a row of stitches connecting the spots to be tied, then clip halfway between the stitches, tie and trim." They also printed instructions for a variation called "Methodist Tying."

Unquilted Tops. The fashion for tied comforters and the large body of surviving unquilted tops from the years 1875-1950 seem connected. In the Kansas Quilt Project nearly 10% of the items brought in were unquilted tops. We also saw many tops pieced in those years era but quilted rather recently. Unfinished tops seem to hold little value for some owners, who feel they should eventually be quilted, a practice conservators and historians decry because quilting through fabric over fifty years old weakens it and changes the tops' historical value.

The quiltmakers who left so many tops may have saved them to replace worn out comforter covers. They also seem to have valued them as they were. At least one Kansas county fair awarded prizes for "Quilt, piece top" in 1917.

Week #27 Summer Spreads & The Two-Sided Quilt



Corner of a summer spread, a single layer red and green applique in poor condition. You can see the corners are ripped (Did someone nail it to the wall?) and it's quite worn from use and washing. Note the binding, cut from the straight grain of a Turkey red plain. The spread looks to be from 1840 to 1880, the height of the fashion for these appliqué masterpieces. The Colorado antique dealer told me he'd bought it in Myersburg in Bradford County, Pennsylvania. When I bought it in 1984 that corner had an ink signature on the reverse, which I didn't photograph but did write down. It said J. A. or J. H. Caspar. There is nothing left of the signature now twenty years later. I haven't found any genealogical records of a J. Caspar in mid-19th century Pennsylvania. The major lesson here is that ink signatures should be photographed, scanned or photocopied for preservation.

Summer Spreads Defined. Related to the category of unquilted tops is the summer spread. Quilts are three layers: top, batting and backing. In my 1989 *Clues in the Calico* I defined a spread "as a single-layer coverlet with finished edges." Quilt collectors distinguish between a unquilted top, which is not bound, and a finished summer spread.

But I realize now that there are at least three major categories of summer spreads, all finished bedcoverings. One is the top with a finished edge but neither batting nor backing. Another is a top and back tied or quilted together without the batting. The State Museum of Pennsylvania has a small quilt display online with a glossary that describes a third kind. A Summer Spread is "a quilt top which is backed but has neither batting nor quilting."

A search for "summer spreads" on the web shows a variety of types. There are pieced and appliqued tops tied or quilted to a backing without any batting. There are also tops with applied binding. The collection at the International Quilt Study Center doesn't classify quilts as summer spreads, but a search "quilt tops" shows 19 tops, two of which were bound with an applied binding of fabric cut on the grain.

The origins of the term "summer spread" are unknown. It doesn't appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, although this authority for word origins does list "spread" as an American word for bed-cover or coverlet, citing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852:

“[She would] flourish the sheets and spreads all over the apartment.” A computerized word search for “summer spread” through the *Making of America’s* online catalog of thousands of nineteenth-century books turns up only poetry of the sort “sweet summer spread throughout” etc.

Years of Popularity. Decorative lightweight spreads were common in the early years of patchwork in both America and England. The printed palampores from India were often used as unquilted spreads, and early embroidered, stenciled and appliqued pieces were commonly left unquilted. In the nineteenth century, Americans were increasingly likely to quilt their patchwork, although the English have continued a strong tradition of unquilted patchwork spreads. American appliqué quilts from the mid-nineteenth century were sometimes left unquilted but bound, and an occasional pieced quilt was bound and finished as a spread, although this is less practical than with appliqué as there are so many exposed raw seams on the uncovered backs. Many pieced and appliqued tops were tied or quilted to a backing without any batting.

Foundation patchwork was frequently finished as a spread. Log Cabins and crazy Quilts were bound, hemmed or ruffled with no backing fabric other than the foundation fabric that supports each patchwork block. The unbacked state of some Crazy Quilts and Log Cabins can be a cause of concern to their owners, who sometimes have the urge to “finish” them, but the makers were apparently following a traditional finishing concept.

Two-Sided Quilts. Another variation on the standard three-layer quilt of top, batt and back is the two-sided quilt made of two tops with a batting in between. Two-sided quilts are unusual, and the traditions behind them are largely unexplored. Myron and Patsy Orlofsky in *Quilts in America* speculated that the two-sided quilt was a rural Southern regionalism. We do see more from the South. Alabama collectors Robert and Helen Cargo found many as they purchased quilts by African-American southerners. But two-sided quilts originated all over the nation, made by quiltmakers from regions as diverse as New England villages, Ohio Amish country, and the North Carolina Piedmont.

The Orlofskys believed the style developed after 1800; there are no 18th century examples in the literature. Gloria Seaman Allen found the estate inventory of a Maryland woman dated 1811 describing “1 Piece Both sides” for a quilt valued at \$4. This is possibly the earliest written reference to a two-sided quilt. Such quilts survive from throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Whether they were particularly popular at one time or another hasn’t been determined.

Quilt backings or linings are typically of a single fabric seamed to cover the wide surface. We occasionally come across a quilt with a patchwork lining of randomly sized scraps, probably the quiltmaker’s solution to a shortage of the fabric necessary for a unified back. But a lining patched together of random scraps does not make a true two-sided quilt, one intended to be shown with the down side up.

Quiltmakers viewing two-sided quilts love to speculate as the maker's motivation. Some quiltmakers (the kind who confess to occasional impatience with the process of piecing a top) marvel at the idea of doing twice as much work to obtain a single quilt. But others (the kind who love to piece and hate to quilt) view the two-sided quilt as a solution to the quilting problem. You get twice as much patchwork and only have to quilt it once.

In some two-sided quilts it is difficult to tell which side was intended to be the front. Each stands on its own as a complete design, giving the impression that the seamstress had, at the last moment, basted two unrelated tops together. Others offer little doubt as to the maker's intentions, especially when we find two-faced quilts with distinct personalities. One side is conventional, organized and proper, while the other seems wild and chaotic. There is no doubt which side is up; the formal side faces the public. The less-restrained side stays undercover. In many of these Jekyll and Hyde cases, the linings seem to be made of leftovers or false starts. Quiltmakers too frugal to discard anything saved spare blocks and partially finished tops to set into a design unfit for show, but adequate for a back. The motivation may be frugality, but the results are artistic, a treat for fans of the unconventional quilt.

Pennsylvania Strippy Backs. One category of two-sided quilts with a strong regional connection is the quilt with a back pieced of strips. The strips are often two bright calico fabrics cut into several widths of equal size, but some backs feature patterns of narrow and wider strips. Observation indicates that these quilts were made in southeastern Pennsylvania, where they are relatively common.

Analyzing quilts from Lancaster County, quilt historian Patricia Herr noted, "In approximately five percent of Lancaster quilts documented, the back consists of two distinct fabrics pieced in strips...This construction is seen more frequently in the northern sections of the country bordering on Berks and Lebanon counties." Strip backs have not been studied to any degree, possibly because Pennsylvanians take them for granted, not realizing that quiltmakers in other areas did not use this style. The strip backs seem to have been popular between 1875 and 1940.

Clues You Can Count On

- Surviving tied comforters date from after 1875, with some rare exceptions.
- A back of pieced strips indicates a Pennsylvania origin between 1875 and 1940.

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