

Donation of the Month

Whig Rose Quilt



2006.76.1

Donors: Joe Milan and Elsie Steele

Family heirlooms are a wonderful way to tell a story, especially if they are passed down through generations. This quilt, made in a unique Whig Rose pattern, is such an heirloom. Made almost 150 years ago, this quilt has seen life cycles of birth, death, marriage, and war. While the hands of the maker are evident in the pattern, the hands of those who owned and shared this quilt are also an important part of its history.

The Whig Rose is a floral appliqué pattern; it is a variation on the Rose of Sharon pattern and has flowers and stems radiating from a central rose. Often the Whig Rose patterns have long, straight stems instead of the bent designs in the Rose of Sharon. The Whig Rose and Democrat Rose patterns are attributed to the political elections between the Democrat and Whig parties starting in 1828 when the Democrat party was formed. However, the pattern was popular throughout the later nineteenth-century, long after the Whig party ceased to exist.

This quilt has nine complete rose patterns. Interestingly, all of them have red centers and green stems except one, which has angled blue stems and a more elaborate design in the center. Was this a deliberate choice by the quilt maker? Why did she choose these fabrics and this design? Though we may

never know these answers for sure, we do know a lot about the woman who made it and the family she shared it with.

According to family history, Mary (Polly) Miller created this beautiful quilt in 1858. Mrs. Miller and her family settled in Washington County, Arkansas around 1870 after living in different areas of the United States, including Arkansas, previously. Mrs. Miller passed the quilt to her daughter, Temperance Van Winkle, wife of Peter Van Winkle. The Van Winkles moved from Fayetteville to eastern Benton County, Arkansas where Peter established a lumbering empire. The family lived in a beautiful, isolated area near War Eagle that came to be known as Van Winkle Hollow. As time passed, Temperance Van Winkle gave the quilt to her own daughter Mary.

Mary or Mollie, as she was known, was the second of twelve children. During the Civil War, the dashing Captain John Bell "Jack" Steele of the 1st Arkansas Cavalry courted Mollie, sending her love letters and poems, and even visiting her at the family's war-time home in Texas. Mollie and Captain Jack were married in 1868. For a time they moved around Northwest Arkansas before settling in the newly formed town of Rogers, where Captain Jack played a prominent role in its development. After his death in 1903 Mollie went to live with her son Guy. The quilt passed to Guy and then to Guy's son Milan Steele. It then passed to Milan's son Joe, the great-great-great grandson of Polly Miller. With much love and history invested in this quilt, the family has very generously donated it to the Museum for future preservation and to share this remarkable family's story for generations to come.

Credits: Brackman, Barbara. Clues in the Calico, 1989.

Haders, Phyllis. American Quilts, 1981.

Hicks, Marilyn Larner. The Van Winkle Family, 1990. Rogers Historical Museum Research Library, Donor Interview and Files.