

Oklahoma History Stitched in Quilts



Chenoweth's Civil War Eagle Quilt

by Judy Howard
(See page 1 for larger view of quilt)



This beautiful Eagle Appliquéd Quilt reveals Oklahoma history seen through the eyes of Oklahoma's pioneer women better than any history book.

The quilt top was made in the 1860's by Oklahoma actress Kristen Chenoweth's great-great-great grandmother, Mary McElwain Chenoweth of Webster City, Missouri. Mary made it for her civil war soldier son Benjamin Franklin. Mary's husband Luke died at age thirty-nine, leaving Mary to raise six children and manage a farm in Iowa.



Benjamin Franklin, with his wife Nancy Elizabeth Palmer and their three sons, George, William and David, along with

their wives, came to Indian Territory in 1889. They made the Land Run into the Unassigned Lands, bringing this quilt top with them.

Nancy Chenoweth, with her two daughter's-in-laws Cora Pearl King Chenoweth and Rosanne King Chenoweth, quilted the Eagle top in 1900, winning a blue ribbon in the Hinton County Fair.



George and Cora's first home in Indian Territory in 1889 was this sod dug-out. The oldest daughter of ten children, Maude was born in 1904 in a two-room clapboard home. In 1910 the family moved into this two-story addition.

I had the privilege of interviewing 101 year old Maude Chenoweth Leaman, who owned the Eagle quilt and had it documented by the Heritage Group of the Central Oklahoma Quilters Guild. This group chose this Eagle quilt to be the cover photo for their *Oklahoma Heritage Quilts* book.

Maude was always by her mother's side helping with cooking, gardening, quilting and sewing. When Maude was six, Cora's doctor forbade Cora from using her treadle sewing machine because of phlebitis. Since Maude was too short to reach the pedal of this machine, brought to Oklahoma in a covered wagon, George came



up with the perfect solution. Maude stood on her tiptoes guiding the fabric through the machine while older brother Earl squatted on the floor working the treadle with his hands. Cora sat near by and gave the two youngsters instructions. In this way the three produced the family's clothing and the quilts to keep them warm through the cold winters.

Quilts formed the backdrop for Maude's fulfilling life from early childhood days to her funeral, where her quilts were displayed and her story from *Heavenly Patchwork* was read. Maude's quilts mark Oklahoma's centennial history as well as her own history. They chronicle events like births, deaths, anniversaries and graduations and they provide comfort and healing through tragic losses.

When asked once her secret for living a long and successful life, Maude replied, "Life has given me lots of pieces of sorrow and hard work, but I always was determined to keep on smiling through the tears, and loving and helping as Jesus did. Like my mama told me when my first doll of wax got a little too close to the potbellied stove and melted, 'When life gives you scraps, make quilts!'"



"Rejoice in the Lord always . . . Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."
Philippians 4:4, 6

And Satan Came Also

by Judy Howard



When I purchased this Crazy quilt at Wythe Munford's estate sale in Nichols Hills, Oklahoma, I asked Wythe if he knew anything about it. He said it had belonged to his mother, Rose Swirczyski Munford who was born in 1904 in Oklahoma City.

In the late 1800's the Swirczyski family and their friends the Munfords voyaged together from Poland to Ellis Island and then traveled in wagons to settle in Munster, Texas. Julius Swirczyski and Rosalie Munford grew up and married in Munster and had ten children. Then the two families traveled across the Red River in a wagon caravan to settle in Oklahoma City before statehood. "The Swirczyskis first lived across from the Katy Depot before moving uptown to Fourth Street," Wythe explained. "When they moved to 1401 Northeast Twelfth, near the Ritz Theater, Rose and her sister Mary feared they'd never date a boy again since they lived so far out of town."

Both sisters married quite well, and soon afterwards—Rose to her childhood friend George Munford and Mary to Albert McRill, born in 1880 in Franklin County, Kansas.

The McRills came to Oklahoma Territory in 1902. After establishing the *Dispatch People's Voice* at Watonga,

Albert McRill helped compile the Oklahoma Statutes of 1910, and practiced Law in Oklahoma City as G.A. Nichol's attorney until Albert's death in 1956. Always active in politics and the pro-temperance campaign, Albert served as Oklahoma City's Manager from 1931 to 1933. He was also special justice of Oklahoma's Supreme Court, and he taught law at Oklahoma City University, besides conducting a men's Bible class of 1,000 regular attendees in the downtown Empress Theater.

But McRill raised eyebrows when he wrote *And Satan Came Also*—the inside story that exposed Oklahoma City's seamy side of society, regaling tales about early Oklahoma City's "bon ton" or "tenderloin" district. McRill's book continues to amuse readers with true stories of Two Johns, The Turf Exchange, The Southern Club, Big Anne's House of Ill Repute, Old Zulu, Noah's Ark, and The Red Onion. Albert's purpose was not to titillate, but to applaud the courageous efforts of Overholser, Hefner and others to clean up the early statehood criminal element and to stand against the corrupt political machine.

Two of Rose's less controversial brothers operated the Midwest Bakery on Fourth Street in the 1930's. Wythe now works as a member of the Lyric Board to remodel the old Plaza Theater on Sixteenth Street and to produce the Centennial showing of "Oklahoma" in 2007.

Just like Rose's Crazy quilt, God pieces all kinds of people, great and small, together in a seemingly chaotic manner to produce a great city or work of art.

*"The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations.
 Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people He has chosen as His own inheritance."*
Psalms 33:11-12

Christie, A Hero in a Sunbonnet

by Gayle Puckett Smithson



Christie Updike, 18 years old

Heroes exemplify a life of courage and strength in times of adversity. They remain steadfast in their faith and service to God. My hero was my grandmother Christie Updike, who, as a young girl, dared to ride with her father in the Cherokee Strip Land Run of 1893.

The Updike family took a giant leap of faith when they came to New Amsterdam from the Netherlands in the early 1650's to escape religious persecution. Known as planters and traders, the Updikes loved their new country and fought for freedom in the American Revolution.

Born in Indiana in 1883 to John Wiley and Mary Elizabeth Updike, Christie was a ninth generation American. In 1890, John, with his wife and four children, took another Updike leap of faith and headed West by covered wagon to Humboldt, Kansas. There, on leased land, John raised cattle for market. When only seven years old, Christie helped herd cattle on horseback. Known as a "dead eye shot" even at that young age, Christie supplied the family with a steady diet of prairie chickens.

When President Cleveland proclaimed the Cherokee Strip open for settlement on September 16, 1893, Christie's father vowed to acquire some of that free land. After the U.S. Cavalry had staked out 160 acre farms, John snuck into the Strip driving a wagon with his fourteen year old son Virgil in tow.

After selecting a choice acreage, John left Virgil, with the wagon hidden in a gully and rode one of the horses back to the starting line. John had warned his son to lay low and to keep the canvas cover off the wagon to prevent the soldiers from spotting the wagon. But during the

night, a thunderstorm came up with heavy wind and rain. Virgil raised the canvas top on the wagon to protect the family's belongings. Soldiers spotted the wagon and were waiting when John reached Virgil. The soldiers declared him a "sooner." John contested it in court but ultimately lost.

Instead, the family farmed leased land near Bliss, Oklahoma and Christie's father worked at the famous 101 Ranch. Being the oldest girl, Christie performed many of the household duties. By the time she was twelve, Christie did the baking and sewing for the entire family. The Updikes befriended the Ponca Indians and Christie developed a close friendship with Mae Little Dance, daughter of Chief Little Dance, Headman for the Ponca Tribe.

When Christie was in her early twenties, the Ponca Indian agency hired her to teach sewing to the girls at White Eagle Boarding School. Christie lived at the school with the girls. When most women of the day were considered spinsters at the age of twenty-two, Christie was satisfied earning a salary doing what she considered to be important work. Her "advancing age" never bothered her. She felt that if God wanted her to marry, He would supply an acceptable groom. She came close to marrying before her teaching job, but broke it off when she found that her fiancé was a drinker.



One of my favorite “Christie” stories is about Mae Little Dance and her father. “While I was sleeping one night at the White Eagle Dormitory, Mae excitedly shook me awake because Mae’s father Chief Little Dance was dying,” Christie would tell me. According to the Ponca Indians’ religious belief, whatever a person wore when buried would be what they wore throughout eternity. Being a flamboyant dresser, the Chief wanted to wear a red shirt in the hereafter, but he didn’t own such a shirt. Mae was confident that Christie could quickly sew one for him.

Still in her nightdress, Christie worked by lamplight into the wee hours of the morning and completed the shirt in record time. “Chief Little Dance loved his new red shirt and lived to wear it out,” Christie would conclude with a laugh.

Christie could always be counted on to help friends and family in need. In 1909, two family members contracted typhoid fever while living in Fletcher, Oklahoma. At age twenty-six, Christie quit her job and rode in the caboose of a supply train to Fletcher. Little did she know what God had in store for her. Soon after she arrived, Christie met Treat (C.T.) Winters at church and they were married a year later in Bliss, Oklahoma. True to her vow not to marry a “drinker,” God provided a Christian man who never took a drink. Christie and Treat finally settled in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma where they raised their six children.

Christie’s vocabulary did not include self-pity. She frequently responded to negative people, “Just pull up your socks and go on!” Christie believed that every job needed to be done right and done with enthusiasm. Colossians 3:23 applied to every form of work. If her children’s work didn’t please her, she would say, “You better lick that calf again!”

Christie loved to quilt and every quilt in the frame produced a party. I can still remember playing underneath the frame, listening to the stories and the laughter that followed. My love of quilting was born under Christie’s quilting frame.

Heroes are given medals and parades are held in their honor. While songs, poems and books have been written to memorialize their deeds, I chose to honor my hero in a medium that I know she would love. I designed “Christie’s House” after her farmhouse in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma. I completed the quilt in 1985, thirty-one years after Christie’s death. In 1989, I designed and quilted the Land Run Quilt, pictured on the front of this book, as a tribute to Christie’s courage and pioneering spirit.

People have all kinds of heroes. My hero will always be a girl in a sunbonnet who grew up to be a woman full of conviction, compassion and an unwavering faith in God.

*“And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men,”
Colossians 3:23*

