



THE GOOD OLD QUILTING BEE STILL SURVIVES

Photograph by Rogers, Clinton

Huron County reminiscence of the days when the patchwork quilt was the supreme work of art at the township fair.

The Quilt that Mother Made

DRIVING in the country on the edge of an Ontario town a week or two ago a member of the *COURIER* staff observed a picture which because of its simple beauty and fine suggestiveness caused him to turn his horse and go right back to town for a photographer. The result appears in the illustration on this page. To an everyday observer it may have looked like just a small company of women gathered together in the most usual way; and in a manner so it was; but with unconscious ease these women were doing a thing which very few women of nowadays ever do anywhere; that which their mothers and grandmothers did before them in the days of the log cabin in the lane. They were at a quilting bee; and the quilting bee is one of the institutions that have helped to make the local history of Canada.

Quilts were very important in the old days. The patchwork quilt was the masterpiece of the household. Some farmhouses still contain one dozen each. To make one quilt was a large order. A sane woman rarely attempted such a thing. It would have been quite as foolish as to peel all the dried apples with one knife or sew all the carpet rags with one needle. Hence arose the rag bees, the paring bees and the quilting bees which made the humdrum lives of the women on the concessions and the sideroads an occasional festival of great joy.

So it is chronicled in the annals of the neighbourhood—"the storm that came the day of Kate Nagle's rag bee," or the thing that happened the day 'Liza Jenkins had her quilting bee. This is among the older folk. The young farm wives have no such chronology. They have no time to make quilts, and rag carpets are going out of fashion. Style is marching along. The "boughten" rug now decorates the parlour floor and the bargain-counter "eider-down", stuffed with goodness knows what adorns the bed in the spare bedroom.

And of course the paring-machine long ago drove out the peeling bee, and the factory evaporator has just about done away with the hand-paring machine. Such is progress. But they will never be able to replace the good old bees of our mothers and fathers.

Well, there was a large assortment of fabrics

that for months had been accumulating; the daintiest pickings and stealings from the worn-out or left-over remnants of the household dry-goods. For a dress might be worn out in front and the back be as good as new for a quilt. Half a yard of print was left from the making of a shirt. Old neckties had been gathered up. Bits of silk and satin and velvets and plushes had been garnered from strange places—and it was a standing wonder to the man of the house where half the flimsy fabrics came from that his wife sat and snipped at with the scissors night after night at the kitchen table while he read the farm paper or snoozed upon the lounge.

But this quilt was to be a work of art. It was designed not only to keep out cold but to please the eye. On the spare bed it was more decorative than any counterpane; its colour scheme was the most fantastic and its patterns of geometry the most satisfying and illusionary that the skill of mother and the girls could devise. Indeed it was counted a high stroke of art not to have in the same quilt three pieces of a fabric exactly alike. There are quilts on Canadian beds to-day that would puzzle the visitor who has taken the trouble to inspect before going to bed—to discover any two patches of the crazywork scheme that are duplicates.

Having got the fabrics and the general layout of the scheme decided upon, it was the business of the assemblage of women so to work the patches that the most artistic effects would be the result. That quilt must win the prize at the Fair or Mrs. Bumble must know the reason why. If the man Dave could win a prize for a calf or a pumpkin, why should not the feminine brain of the household get a prize for a quilt?

There was plenty of cooking all ready; pies and cakes and doughnuts and pickles and preserves. Everything was clear for the long day's work; and the bigger and more stunning the fabrication of that monumental and historic quilt the more amazing and devious the talk.

The preacher came in for a fair share. He was the first public character. His shortcomings in the pulpit; his horses and his rigs; the clothes he wore and the way he conducted family devotions; his wife's clothes and her manners; the doings of the

next church on the circuit; the Christmas tree that had been such a huge success and the tea-meeting that fizzled out on account of the storm—so much for the preacher and God bless him!

Then there was the teacher. If it was a young man his affairs with the girls were a fit subject for criticism. He was a good hand at a prayer-meeting, fine in the choir, excellent at Sunday school and a fair talker at the young people's meeting, if such had been invented. In the school he had his faults—but of course we all have. He used too much strap; or he used it on the wrong pupils. He showed partiality; liking one family more than another and visiting there more than he should, but going near no one on the back line.

Of course there were crops and roads to discuss; though mostly the men looked after that. Of politics the women knew nothing. On fashions they were uninformed. There were marriages, however, mostly happy; some that were ill-advised. For whoever would have dreamed that Widower Jackson in the brick house would have married a young wife only two years after his first wife's death? Some marriages also were too tardy. So-and-So had been going with a girl for ten years; high time they were married. One of the girls in the settlement had gone off to the town to learn dressmaking; well she would be glad to get back to the good old farm—cure her of wandering; unless she should get married to a town man—but then half those town fellows were not so well off as they looked; largely a matter of style. This young man had piked out West; had not written home in two years. One of these days he would be back, and it was a shame he ever went away, because the farm needed him; the fences were down and the land needed clearing, and if the lad's father was ever to get the mortgage lifted it never would be by hiring a man.

So they gave the hired men a raking over the coals; and they took a turn at the township councillors. And they talked so smoothly that the patches grew into the quilt almost without any one noticing how time was flying or even hearing the stroke of the clock—till suddenly the woman whose quilt it was all about happened out in the kitchen and discovered that it was half an hour from supper time and got busy at the stove.

Such in bald outline was the quilting bee that helped to make the quilt for the township fair.

A. B.