

Quilts played an important role in Oregon's history, as exhibits show

Published: Saturday, September 24, 2011, 10:00 AM Updated: Monday, September 26, 2011, 5:51 PM



By **John Terry**, Special to The Oregonian



[View full size](#) Willamette Heritage Center Mary Bywater Cross, a quilt historian and guest curator, studies the "Wandering Foot" quilt prior to its being hung in the "Treasures from the Trunk; Quilts and Their Makers" on display through Dec. 24 at the Willamette Heritage Center at the Mill in Salem.

Correction appended

--

The quilt, made in 1870, lay undisturbed in a trunk for goodness knows how many years.

Its maker, Susan Mary Officer Vaughn, came across the Oregon Trail in 1845 at age 12. She married William Hatchett Vaughan in 1847, then bore 11 children, all of whom survived, and died in 1911 at age 78.

In 1967, a descendant who lived in the same Italianate-style country home William built on their farm near Molalla in 1883, also died. An estate sale followed, in which a local woman bought the trunk and its contents.

The house's current occupants, Champ and Maria Vaughan, bought it back into the family.

"When she (the woman who bought the trunk) heard we'd purchased the house, she contacted me ... and said she had a trunk and a couple of quilts that belonged to Susan Vaughan," Champ Vaughan said. "She returned them to us and didn't even ask us to pay for them."

The quilt is now part of "Treasures from the Trunk: Quilts and Their Makers After the Oregon Trail Journey," at the Willamette Heritage Center in Salem through Dec. 24.

Vaughn said his family quilt is "not a very fancy quilt. It was obviously used a lot, and its border had been folded over and re-stitched, probably due to wear." But it obviously held history in every stitch and it impressed the curator, Mary Bywater Cross, also the author of "Quilts of the Oregon Trail."

The Vaughan quilt joins 15 others Cross carefully researched and selected to showcase the artistry of Oregon Trail quilt makers and their value as historic records.

The star of the show is one Cross calls the Oregon Pioneer Ribbon Quilt, made by Elizabeth Ann Clark Kelly, a member of Portland's prolific Clinton Kelly clan. It now belongs to the American Folk Art Museum in New York City. This is the first time it's been shown in Oregon. At the center of the quilt is a commemorative handkerchief from the 1894 Midwinter Fair in San Francisco. Around it are arrayed badges or ribbons of organizations central to Oregon history.

Then there's Abigail Scott Duniway's Hexagon Quilt from the Oregon Historical Society. Duniway is renowned as Oregon's premier suffragette, first female newspaper editor and an astute businesswoman. From her early career running an Albany millenary, she was also an accomplished seamstress.

But Duniway was not a dedicated quilter. Cross notes her quilt is "acknowledged as not being artistically beautiful or exceptionally well crafted." Still, such a historic piece is worthy of exhibit.

Writing in her newspaper, *The New Northwest*, in 1880, Duniway excoriated the craft:

"Any fool can make a quilt; and after we had made a couple of dozen over twenty years ago, we quit the business with a conviction that nobody but a fool would spend so much time in cutting bits of dry goods into yet smaller bits and sewing them together again, just for the sake of making believe that they are busy at practical work."

That sentiment is neatly rebuffed by the myriad quilts produced by other Oregon women during her lifetime, and by the spirit with which quilting has made a resurgence. Dozens of quilting events are held throughout Oregon each year. "Treasures" coincides with Salem's annual "Quiltopia" next weekend.

-- **John Terry**

This article reflects the following correction, published Tuesday, Sept. 27, 2011: A quilt made by Abigail Scott Duniway that is part of a quilt show in Salem is a Hexagon Quilt. The quilt's type was misidentified in the Oregon's Trails column in *The Sunday Oregonian*.