

**ROGUE VALLEY GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY**

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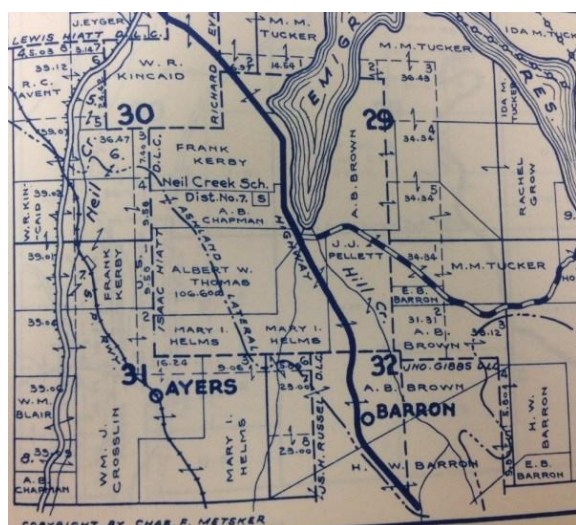
*The Rogue Digger* is a publication of the Rogue Valley Genealogical Society ([www.rvgsociety.org](http://www.rvgsociety.org)), which is a non-profit organization governed by a thirteen-member Board consisting of elected officers, past president, and appointed directors of the Standing Committees, all with voting rights. A subscription to *The Rogue Digger* is included with membership. Annual dues are \$30 for an individual; additional members in the same household are \$15 each. Membership includes library checkout privileges. Our library website is [www.rvgslibrary.org](http://www.rvgslibrary.org). Background map of Jackson County, OR and miner's image courtesy RVGS.

*Editor's Note:*

Tom Sayre, a member and volunteer at RVGS, responds to online queries that require research. Recently he had an interesting query that led to the following article. The query has also inspired a talk that Tom and Roger Roberts will be giving at the RVGS general meeting on May 20th at 1:30 p.m. The meeting is open to the public and is followed by "Diggin' in the Dark" a free research night for the public and members.

## HAVE YOU EVER HEARD OF AYERS, JACKSON COUNTY, OREGON?

By Tom Sayre



1932 Charles F. Metzger Map showing Ayers in relation to Emigrant Lake and Barron (Mountain House). (Image courtesy Roger Roberts)

Finding evidence of a long-ago place of importance in the development of Jackson County is certainly interesting. The question that immediately comes to mind is, "For whom was this place named?"

The adjacent image is from a 1932 Charles F. Metzger Map showing the logging, saw-milling, mining and railroading community of Ayers, Oregon. Its location was about six miles southeast of Ashland, Oregon on first the Oregon & California Railroad Line which later became the Southern Pacific Railroad Line. Ayers and a railroad siding called Ayers Spur were located just south of the RR crossing on the current Neil Creek Road.

(Clarification: Facts found during the research of this story show that Ayers and Ayers Spur were used interchangeably. Unless otherwise noted, Ayers is used to define a "community" and Ayers Spur to define a railroad spur line.)

In October 2013 as a research volunteer with the Jackson County Genealogy Library, I received a seemingly simple request from a lady in Sacramento seeking the birthplace of her great grandmother Minnie Belle (Bilderbach) Cowen. The information I found and assembled satisfied her request; however this led to a bigger and more intriguing challenge.

I struggle a bit in determining how to relate this tale, so I'll simply tell it as it unfolded and continues to unfold.

According to the 1910 U. S. Census, I found that Minnie and her husband Charles lived in Mountain, Siskiyou County, California. This long-ago place was near what is known now as Iron Gate Reservoir. Charles was probably a seasonal worker for the Neil Creek Sawmill, the Ashland Box and Lumber Manufacturing Company or the Oregon & California Railroad; all of which were located in or near the place called Ayers, Oregon, in the Neil Creek drainage.

It might have been that the family's routine was to spend the hard winter months in Mountain returning to Ayers for employment during the easier mild-weather months. In 1909, records show that a son was born in a place called Ayers Spur in Jackson County, Oregon, to Minnie and Charles. This son would be the grandfather of the Sacramento lady who made the initial research request.

*Skidding logs by mule team on Neil Creek in the early 1900s. This photo probably pre-dated the next photo showing the log flume. (Photo courtesy of the Southern Oregon Historical Society; SOHS Elhart Collection, P-634-C-1905)*



*Early 1900s logging flume on Neil Creek used to transport logs from the woods to the Ashland Box & Lumber Mfg. Co. Mill at Ayers. This method replaced horse, mule and oxen log-skidding on the steep hillsides. (Photo courtesy of Southern Oregon Historical Society; SOHS 20769)*



There are records showing other births in Ayers in the early 1900s, supporting the idea that there were families living there, not just workmen. Might there have been a doctor or at least a midwife present to assist in births? It stands to reason that there must have been a community of some sort located there, given the available water resources, prime timber, granite deposits, wild game and fish available for the table, as well as the railroad and primitive access road to the booming community known as Ashland. Possibly there are unidentified old graves or burying grounds as might be found in any "settlement" of old.

I felt compelled to find out more about this seemingly forgotten place, but first needed to satisfy the Sacramento lady's inquiry.

A bit more digging in the databases of the Jackson County Genealogy Library led me to a huge bound volume of the *Jackson County Juvenile Court Record* which rests on a library shelf just crying out to be picked up and read. I often glance at these old ledgers as I walk past, paying scant attention, but liken them now to a discounted grandparent or great-grandparent simply waiting to be asked about the knowledge and treasures they hold.

I found a complete court record from 1914 to 1917 of the proceedings that determined the fate not only of the boy born at Ayers Spur in 1909 to Minnie, but also of his two brothers as well as a sister. They were determined by the court to be delinquents, and in one case incorrigible, and were duly committed to places like The Boys and Girls Aid Society, The Oregon Industrial School for Girls, The St. Mary's Home for Boys and The Oregon State Training School. These measures were taken because Minnie was unable to provide for her children's welfare or education as a result, in part, of her husband deserting her and the children in Ayers.

After catching her breath, the Sacramento lady to whom I relayed this information recalled a long-ago conversation with her mother who remembered that her father (the mother's father—the lady's grandfather) mentioned that he spent some time in an orphanage near Portland. The family knew little of this episode in their grandfather's life but there it was, in sad detail, thanks to that old volume resting on our library shelf.

Well, end of story and a happy conclusion for the Sacramento lady's request. Maybe, but we're not done quite yet. As any dedicated researcher knows, one bit of information leads to another tickler and away we go.

I simply had to find out more about this long-ago community of Ayer or Ayers Spur, Oregon. Was it named for a pioneer person or family? Was it named for a railroad section hand who was killed during the building of the Oregon & California Railroad? Why is there not one smidgen of physical evidence and only limited recorded documentation to mark that place where people lived and toiled and died for close to 60 years?

An article written by Bernice Gillespie for the *Ashland Tidings* in June 1966 provided a sequential record of mill ownership, lumbering and granite quarry developments and operations in the Neil Creek drainage. Interestingly, the base for the Lithia fountain in Ashland's Plaza is from the Blair Granite Quarry in Neil Creek.

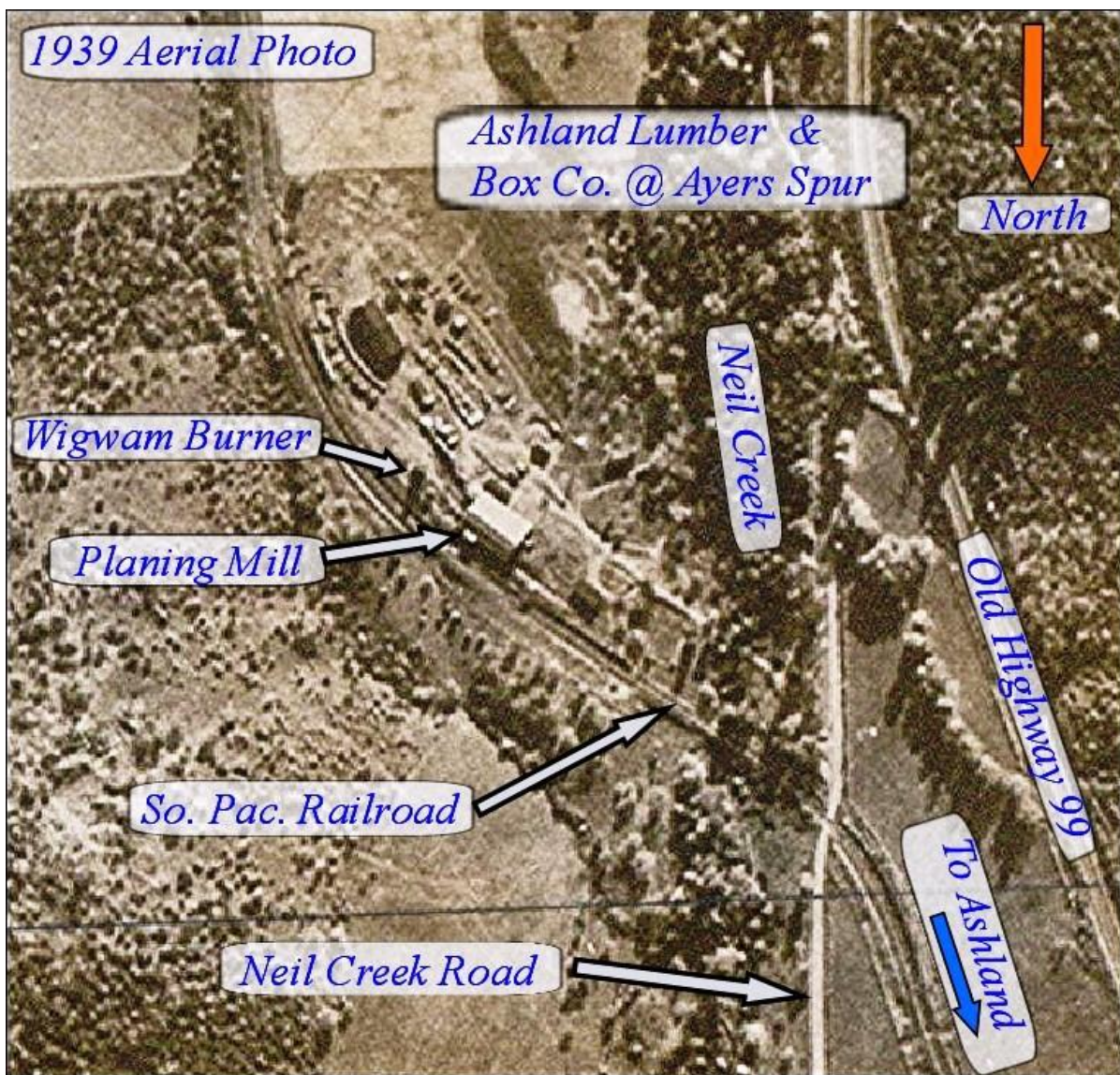
The Blair Granite Quarry operated from 1910 until 1945, providing employment for ten skilled men. Their product was monument stone utilized throughout Oregon and California.

Records indicate in excess of a hundred workers and scores of other support or service people were employed by the Ashland Box & Lumber Manufacturing Company, to say nothing of the families of these men. Case in point: Minnie Belle Bilderbach Cowen and her children. Chinese men and women provided various support services in all phases of endeavors. Many worked in the cooking facilities at Ayers for mill owner John Christiansen's wife in support of the lumbermen. The 1910 Census shows 33 Chinese laborers living in the Barron Precinct of Jackson County and listed as "partners." They were employed as laborers on the "steam railroad."

With excellent assistance from others, I began to accumulate indisputable evidence of this long-ago place. Photographs and maps from decades past, when compared with those of the present, began to paint a picture of life on upper Neil Creek and the community of Ayers, Oregon, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Former Jackson County Surveyor Roger Roberts used his expert land ownership knowledge and mapping talents to provide welcome assistance. Taking a current aerial image from Google Earth, he superimposed an old blueprint of the railroad right-of-way. We found there was an Ashland Box and Lumber Manufacturing Mill, a planing mill, bunkhouses, dwellings, toolsheds, a section house and more. An old wigwam (or teepee) burner is in evidence and remains today.

Roger next provided a 1939 aerial photo taken by the U. S. Army during the planning and construction of Camp White at White City. Labels indicate the relationship of the planing mill to Neil Creek, Neil Creek Road and the Southern Pacific Railroad.



1939 aerial view of the Neil Creek area. None of these structures exist today, with the exception of the wigwam burner. The Ayers Railroad Spur ran between the main line and the Planing Mill. (Photo courtesy of Roger Roberts)



*Treated railroad ties that presumably once held the Ayers Spur rails offer a reminder of what once was. (2014 photo by T. Sayre)*

Several hundred feet southeast of the planing mill is evidence of dwellings and other buildings as well as what may be the location of the Ashland Box & Mfg. Company Mill (not shown on the 1939 aerial). It is also possible that this was the location of Ayers “proper,” simply because of the concentration of workers (and associated families) needed to operate the saw mill.



*Circa 1900 photograph of the Oak Street Lumber Company that received planed boards from Ayers. This lumber yard was located at Oak Street and the RR crossing in Ashland. The same company occupies this site today as the Ashland Lumber Company. Grizzly Peak can be seen in the background. The man shown tipping his hat in the center-right-foreground is John Marshall Hicks, brother of Neil Creek Sawmill owner Horace J. Hicks. (Photo courtesy of Jan Wright)*

Logs were transported from upper Neil Creek to the Ashland Box & Lumber Manufacturing Company Mill located at Ayers by draft animals as well as by flume. Boards made there were transported for further processing to the planing mill via the Ayers Railroad Spur. They then were sent on to Ashland via the main rail line, ending up at the Oak Street Lumber Company.

The following photo shows a second saw mill assumed to be that which was located at the junction of Neil and Y Creeks. An excerpt from the 1966 Bernice Gillespie article in the *Ashland Tidings* says, “A second mill was built farther up the

creek at the junction of Neil and Y Creeks and the old water power operation was converted to steam. Neil Creek was dammed for a pond. Several of the men built cabins and their families lived near the mill.” Could this have been home for Minnie Belle and Charles Cowan and their children?



*Logs being fed from the log pond to the steam-powered saw at the “Upper Mill.” (Photo courtesy of the Southern Oregon Historical Society; SOHS 2532)*



*Current Google Earth image orientated north-south, showing locations addressed in the text.*

Using records held by title companies in Grants Pass and Medford, as well as in the Jackson County Clerk’s Office, Roger and I, along with assistance from historian Chuck Eccleston, attempted to find historic land ownership records of the Neil Creek area, thinking the Spur and/or community was named after a person or family named Ayer or Ayers. We found nothing with those names that could be associated with the Neil Creek area.

Then we got lucky, or seemingly so. Upon close scrutiny, the 1910 map of Jackson County showed that a man named H. W. Dyer owned the property upon which the lumbering and manufacturing facilities as well as the railroad and spur were located. A search of land patent records indicated that a Henry W. Dyer was issued an original patent for that parcel and additional land in the Neil Creek area in May of 1872 under authority of the 1862 Homestead Act.

*Dyer... Ayer?* Could it be that for some unknown reason the spelling was changed? Certainly there was circumstantial evidence, but a strong case nonetheless. Let's call it good for now and try to disprove it.

And then we got luckier still...

Walking through the reception area of the Genealogy Library, I saw a flyer announcing an upcoming Railroad Show in Medford. A call to the contact name listed on the flyer brought remarkable results. An additional name was given and in short time I had a copy of a page from the book, *Rails in the Shadow of Mt. Shasta* by John R. Signor. It states in part:

“Milepost 422.6 – Mistletoe. This siding, formally known as Ayers, was changed to Mistletoe on May 20, 1914, and probably reflects the copious amounts of the parasite clinging to all nearby oak trees in the vicinity.”

The Oregon & California Railroad was completed in 1887. In 1891, Milepost 425 (Neil Creek) was established as Ayers Spur. According to the documentation, the names were interchangeable for years to come and even as late as 1932 when Ayers was still named on the Charles F. Metzger Map.

There remain tantalizing clues yet to be researched. One in particular is very intriguing: 29 year old William L. Crume is shown in the 1900 Census for Barron Precinct in the employ of Horace J. Hicks, second or third owner of the first sawmill on Neil Creek.

William Crume's occupation is listed as a photographer! This conjures up all kinds of possibilities. Could he have taken the photographs of the mule team and the logging flume and the Oak Street Lumber Company? These are certainly posed photographs likely taken by a professional photographer. Are there more attributable photos hidden away somewhere? Are there old-timers or their descendants living in the vicinity who might have family connections to Ayers or Ayers Spur or Mistletoe?



*The last and only known “onsite” remnant of the Ayers Spur Community: the wigwam or teepee burner that was situated beside the planing mill. (2014 photo by T. Sayre)*

Descendants of Minnie Belle (Bilderbach) Cowen come to mind.



A considerable number of local newspaper articles from 1902 through 1918 have been located since, all displaying references to Ayers, Ayers Spur or Mistletoe. They relate stories of family tragedies, social doings, logging, milling, railroading, mining and the people involved.

Ayers also gained statewide notoriety for the infamous murder of 27-year-old Jesse Thrasher of Jacksonville and the ensuing 1910 trial.

The picture is becoming clearer. The “Neil Creek Community” was once a vital workplace, as well as home to many during the first half of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

There is much more to discover, but for now, my thanks go out to the lady from Sacramento for asking!



***Editor's Note:***

RVGS is pleased to present on the next several pages another article in our series about the connections between quilts and genealogy. We are grateful to Bill Gardner of Golden, Colorado, the editor-in-chief of *The Quilters Newsletter* for permission to reprint this article. “What’s in a Name?” first appeared in the February/March issue of the aforementioned newsletter.

As you may know, the Rogue Valley Genealogical Society has partnered with the Jacksonville Museum Quilters to present a series of talks on Genealogy and Quilts during 2013-2014. Here is a link to a schedule of those talks: <http://www.rvgsociety.org/pdf/GenealogyAndQuilts.pdf>. An illustrated schedule of those talks with photos of the featured quilts can be found on the Mountain Star Quilters Society website: <http://www.msquilters.com/>. Please visit that site to learn more about the series of talks and about quilts and quilters in Southern Oregon and Northern California.

*Phil Papp, Lila Wynne, Tom Koppitz, Edith L. Olds, Libby, M. Pearson*

# What's in a Name?

BY ZJ HUMBACH



**Signature Quilt,**  
79" x 90",  
circa 1855-1863,  
by Mercy Jane  
Bancroft Blair of  
South Apalachin,  
New York.  
IQSC 1997.007.0852



A name on a piece of fabric: it's a simple thing. Combine it with others and you have a signature quilt, also known as an autograph quilt, a friendship quilt, an album quilt, a bride's quilt. Regardless of what you call it, a quilt filled with names sparks curiosity. From their earliest days, signature quilts have marked significant life events such as weddings, births and deaths. They've chronicled family genealogies, have been given to those moving away and have honored people for outstanding accomplishments. ▶



Through September 23, signature quilts from the Midwest and East Coast dating from the 1800s-1970s are featured in "What's in a Name?" – an exhibit at the International Quilt Study Center & Museum (IQSCM) in Lincoln, Nebraska.

"Inscribed quilts have a rich past and have played a significant role in U.S. history," said Carolyn Ducey, Ph.D., curator of collections for IQSCM. "These quilts became a tangible link to significant people during difficult times, such as a war or an epidemic, and they became memory devices."

The first signature quilts appeared during the U.S. Civil War. The U.S. Sanitary Commission, founded in 1861 to promote clean and healthy conditions in Union Army camps and a forerunner of the American Red Cross, collected supplies, bandages and cot-sized quilts for Union soldiers and raffled quilts signed by famous people to raise funds for the North's army. Thousands of quilts – ink-stamped on the back with the words "U.S. Sanitary Commission" – were carried by Union

**"Inscribed quilts...became a tangible link to significant people during difficult times."**

Carolyn Ducey, Ph.D.



troops. Only a handful of these quilts remain as many soldiers were buried in their quilts on the battlefield. After the war, quilt raffles became a mainstay for rebuilding churches, supporting missionaries and recognizing local pastors.

Collecting autographs for quilts became a trend in the late 1800s. In an 1883 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. humorously advised, "It should be a source of gratification to an author to contribute to the soundness of his reader's slumbers if he cannot keep him awake by his writings. He should therefore cheerfully inscribe his name on the scrap of satin or other stuff (provided always that it be sent him in a stamped and directed envelope) that it may take its place in the patchwork mosaic for which it is intended."

Joan Laughlin of Lincoln, a volunteer at IQSCM and a former department chair at the University of Nebraska, was intrigued by a redwork signature quilt in the center's collection. A corner block



**CLOCKWISE from left:**

**The All-American Signature Quilt, 67" x 99", 1975, by Mina K. Kuthe of Maywood, Illinois. IQSC 2006.022.0001**

**UNL-Palladian Society, 75" x 69", circa 1921, maker unknown, probably made in Lincoln, Nebraska. IQSC 1998.004.0001**

**Wistar Family Tree Quilt, 131½" x 131½", 1845, by Sarah Wistar, probably of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, for Sarah Wistar. IQSC 2005.059.0001**

George, Jimmy, Wilso, Mariel, The Daven, Walden, Melinda

of the quilt is inscribed, "University of Nebraska 1871-1921." The opposite corner is inscribed with "UPN." A call to the university's library confirmed the logo on the quilt is similar to that of the Palladian Literary Society, a student organization created shortly after the university began in 1871. The society celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1921.

The blocks contain signatures of more than 100 members of the society embroidered in red. One block has additional embellishment that caught Laughlin's eye: a palm tree and the words "Midura, India." Research revealed the signature on that block belonged to Harriett Wyman Wilder, a graduate of the university who became a missionary in India.

"Joan did an astronomical amount of research on this quilt, which led to her doing genealogical work for IQSCM," Ducey said. "While researching a quilt in Kansas, Joan met Susan Macy, also of Lincoln and a volunteer at IQSCM interested in genealogical research. Together they have unearthed a wealth of information about the signature quilts in our collection."

Laughlin and Macy's work inspired Ducey to curate "What's in a Name?" While the quilts are the drawing card, the stars of the show are the letters, journals, family stories and photographs that document the quilts.

## AMONG QUILTS IN THE EXHIBIT

### Celebrity Autograph Quilt

This quilt has 225 names of politicians, pastors, writers, activists, cartoonists and singers from the 1800s. Some are autographs – original signatures – and some are *allographs* – names signed by someone other than the named person. Louisa May Alcott, P.T. Barnum, Ulysses S. Grant, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Lucretia Mott, Thomas Nast, Mark Twain and Frances E. Willard are among those who autographed the quilt; Abraham Lincoln's is the most famous allograph. The autographs were confirmed by comparing the signatures on the quilt with authenticated signatures found online, a tedious and time-consuming task.

### The All-American Signature Quilt

This red, white and blue quilt, commemorating the U.S. bicentennial, features signatures of news reporters, presidents, comedians and performers from the 1970s. The quiltmaker, Mina K. Kuthe of Maywood, Illinois, sent fabric to 200 celebrities and received 169 signed squares back, including squares from Liberace and Carol Burnett, who sent a personal letter on her printed stationery.

### Star Variation

Ina Poulson of Crofton, Nebraska, spent two years during the 1930s gathering signatures of people she knew. She carried white hexagons in her bag and asked family, friends, students and neighbors to sign them. She collected more than 180 signatures from people in 14 states from Vermont to California.

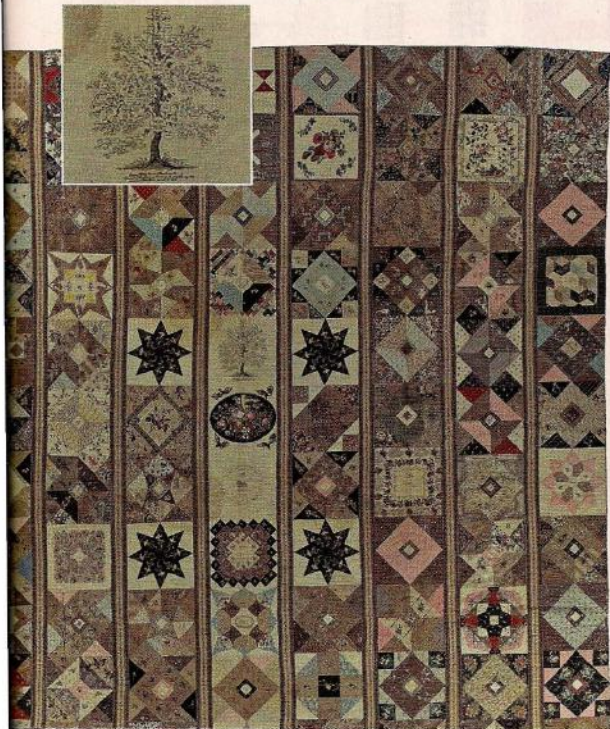
Researching signature quilts is exciting and exhausting. For example, it took searching cemetery, census and marriage records and newspaper articles from 1855-1863 to identify "the ladies of South Apalachin" whose names appear on *Signature Quilt*. South Apalachin, a town in Tioga County, New York, when the quilt was made, no longer exists. Fortunately, more than 50 years of diaries from the Bancroft family who lived there do.

"What's in a Name?" shows how quilts capture the essence of U.S. life, serve as tangible records of people's lives and chronicle U.S. history.

"What can be found with a single name is vital to our understanding of quilt history," Ducey said. Q

ZJ HUMBACH is a professional longarm quilter who owns and operates Dream Stitcher Quilt Studio in Nederland, Colorado. Email her at ZJ@dreamstitcher.com.

FEBRUARY/MARCH 2012 • QUILTERS NEWSLETTER 43



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