

Sallie Crail and the Mystery of the Quilt Competition

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Originally published in the *Lone Peak Lookout*, "Crail Ranch Corner," September 4, 2014

Sallie Creek Crail died 100 years ago this month. Although her Creek ancestors lived much longer, Sallie's death at age 50 was fairly typical for female life expectancy in the early 1900s. By her family's standards, she lived a short but very full life.

In 1886, at 22, Sallie married a man 22 years her senior and bore three children, all of whom were successful in their own manner. But there is so much more to say about Sallie's life.

Sallie herself was somewhat accomplished even at a young age. Before her family migrated to Bozeman from Weston, Missouri, Sallie was a working gal, teaching music at the nearby Female Orphan School, established to educate young girls whose parents perished during the Civil War. In fact, her teaching guitar stands in the parlor of the Crail Ranch Homestead Museum, with the frets marked for instruction.

Sallie was proud of her family, and she celebrated the family narrative in her quilts. Two of Sallie's quilts are displayed at the Crail Ranch: a crazy quilt dated to the 1880s and an embroidered art quilt, dated 1901 by text Sallie embroidered into it. Both contain images of her interests and those of her children: horses, cats, birds, religious icons, and children at play. She even stitched political convention delegate ribbons into her crazy quilt, honoring her husband's participation in the Democratic Party. As one recent museum visitor said, "These quilts weren't made just to keep people warm."



Sallie Crail with Sons Eugene and Emmett, about 1889



Section of Sallie's embroidered-art quilt, 1901



Section of Crazy Quilt, 1880s

According to Crail Family lore, the art quilt top won a ribbon at a Chicago quilting competition. Crail Ranch Conservators have not yet been able to authenticate this award; nor do we know if Sallie herself submitted the quilt, or if the family shipped it off to Chicago after her death. Quilting bees and competitions were common in the early 1900s. The most famous (and some would say notorious) competition, held in 1933 by Sears, Roebuck and Company in conjunction with the World's Fair, attracted more than 25,000 quilt entries.

Is it possible that the Crails would have sent a quilt all the way from Bozeman to Chicago for a competition? Certainly, their only daughter Lilian ventured off to Chicago for nursing school, where she graduated in 1921 at age 26. After graduation, Lilian remained in Chicago, working at Cook County Hospital. Did Lilian pack up the quilt and carry it back to Chicago for a competition?

Perhaps another clue is the Crails' continued "commerce" with Sears, Roebuck and Company as well as Montgomery Ward. Like many rural residents of his day, Emmett, who stayed on the Crail Ranch throughout the entire year for most of his life, procured merchandise through mail order catalogs. In 1939, Emmett sent off to Sears Roebuck some pelts from wolves he had trapped. It is unclear whether Emmett had merely sent the pelts off to be sold through Sears' Raw Fur Marketing Service or if he knew there would be a competition. Emmett's furs won \$5.00 in the Daily Award at the Fur Receiving Station and were placed into competition at the Sears 10th Annual Fur Show.

As a Daily Award winner, Emmett was offered space in Johnny Muskrat's *Tips To Trappers*, an informational magazine published by Sears Roebuck. Sears suggested Emmett share his raw fur preparation techniques and photos of his traplines. Instead, on page 23 of this publication appears a bull elk that "feeds all winter with the cattle on the farm of E. A. Crail, Gallatin Gateway, Montana. Crail, a Daily Award winner, is a Sears shipper."



Elk grazing among Crail cattle in the late 1930s. This photo appeared in the 1939 Johnny Muskrat's *Tips To Trappers*, A Sears Roebuck publication. Does this photo give a clue to a quilt competition award?

Crail Ranch Conservators work hard to authenticate and document so that we are not merely repeating family "stories." Can we authenticate the Crail Family "quilt lore" by citing Lilian's presence in Chicago and Emmett's commerce with Sears? Do those constitute evidence that Sallie's quilt was shipped to Chicago for competition? Certainly not! As with many incidents in history, the details will remain a mystery.