



2ND MINNESOTA BATTERY OF LIGHT ARTILLERY

Quilts can do so much more than warm your toes and were an important part of women's support of their soldiers during the Civil War.

When the Civil War began, the U.S. Army was woefully unprepared to supply the thousands of volunteer soldiers who came in answer to calls for troops. Women saw the need and their efforts to bring aid to the troops soon led to the formation of the United States Sanitary Commission (USSC). This organization acted much like today's Red Cross with smaller local groups called Soldiers' Aid Societies raising money and supplies that were distributed through the USSC. Some 3,200 of these Soldiers' Aid Societies were eventually formed throughout the North.



One desperate need for the soldiers was some sort of bedding especially as winter came on, so the Sanitary Commission put out a call for women to make quilts. Directions were printed in newspapers and flyers with specifications for the kind of quilt the USSC wanted. While the measurements varied slightly in different areas, all were designed to be practical.

Quilts were to be four feet by seven feet. This size fit on a hospital cot without dragging on the floor and was long enough to tuck under a man's feet. Quilts were to be made simply, dark colors if possible to not show the dirt and they were to be tied. Tying a quilt was much faster than quilting it by hand and the idea was to finish more quilts. Quilts made this way were often called "comfortables" which is likely where the "comforter" name originated.

Each quilt that came through the USSC was stamped with "USSC" and often the city and state branch where it had been donated. When the USSC gave out the quilts, they gave them to the soldier, not the Army or the hospital, so that four by seven feet size was again exactly what was needed. The quilt was folded in half lengthwise, then rolled endwise, creating a bed roll that fit perfectly across the soldier's knapsack.

It is estimated that there were more than 250,000 quilts sent through the USSC during the four years of the Civil War.

Another kind of quilt filled an entirely different purpose during the Civil War—fundraising. The USSC was funded in large part by donations, so a fancy quilt to raffle or auction off was a great fund raising tool. This kind of support was not limited to the North and the USSC. Southern women made fancy quilts to auction off as well. One well documented Southern quilt raised over \$500 that was hopefully going to build a gunboat to protect the city and port at Mobile, Alabama. While the effort to build a gunboat failed, the money was sent to the soldier's hospital in Mobile and provided comfort there.

Individual women or groups also made quilts to send to soldiers from their community, church, school or family and were never counted in the total number of quilts sent through official channels. These quilts were sometimes fancier quilts and often contained the names of the makers. Stories are told of soldiers writing to the quilt maker, continuing the correspondence if it blossomed into romance.





Even children got in on the quilt making. A school in Bradford County, Pennsylvania, made a quilt of blocks with white center squares where the teacher helped the children ink their names. The children ranged in age from 6 to 12 years and they not only made the squares, but worked to earn the money to buy the needed supplies for completing the quilt.

Only a handful of original Sanitary Commission quilts are known to exist today as these quilts were meant to be used and most certainly saw hard use. It is known that quilts were even used as shrouds when a soldier died, likely the same quilt that kept him warm in life, covered him in death.

There are more quilts from the Civil War still in existence that were not stamped with USSC as these quilts often contained names or connections to home or family and

were saved.

Today, the tradition continues of providing a veteran with a quilt for warmth and comfort in programs like Quilts of Valor and the quilt/blanket programs in the VA Hospitals nationwide.



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