

## Brought together by a Quilt: A Civil War Romance

By Jean Luddy

When the Civil War began in 1861, many leaders and citizens of the Northern states predicted that the war would be over within a year. After several disastrous military defeats for Union forces, the realization grew that this war would last longer than expected. The logistics for supplying the military with weaponry, food, transportation and military equipment called for organization on a vast scale. The government at the time made valiant efforts to establish and maintain the war machine. However, there were areas where services for soldiers were lacking. Volunteer groups determined where certain needs existed and began efforts to address these concerns.

Among such groups was the United States Sanitary Commission, “a volunteer agency run under government auspices that sought to ensure the health and safety of Union Army soldiers during the American Civil War. It also collected donations of clothing, blankets, food, and medical supplies for military personnel, trained volunteer nurses, and ran a service that located lost or missing soldiers on behalf of their families. Commonly referred to as ‘the Sanitary’ during its years of operation between 1861 and 1865, the USSC served as an umbrella organization for the scores of soldiers' aid societies formed at the local level.”<sup>1</sup> Local groups, often church societies or women’s clubs, gathered donations for soldiers, made clothing items, and rolled bandages to be sent to hospitals for distribution to the wounded.

“In 1863, the USSC requested cot size quilts (approximately 48 x 48 inches) that the soldiers could also use as bedrolls and this amazing group of volunteer women made an estimated 150,000 to 250,000 sanitary commission quilts in addition to providing an abundance of other relief service. Of those quilts only four have survived.”<sup>2</sup>

The USSC supplied quilters with the pattern which consisted of 15 crosses on blocks in five rows by three rows. The quilters could use any color combinations or printed fabrics that they had.<sup>3</sup>

By the summer of 1864, members of the Vernon Connecticut Patriotic Society had finished several blankets and quilts which would be forwarded to the USSC for distribution. Most of the Society’s members lived in Vernon Center and attended the First Congregational Church of Vernon. One of the quilters was 16 year old Fannie

Chester. Fannie slipped a note into one of the quilts. She listed the names of everyone from the Patriotic Society who had sewn the quilt. Then she signed her name and that of her two year old cousin, Lissie Corbin.



*The Chester Family Homestead at the corner of West Street and Dart Road in Vernon Center.*



The quilt made its way to New Berne, North Carolina where it was given to Captain Robert Emmett Fisk of the 132<sup>nd</sup> New York Volunteers. Finding the note inside, Captain Fisk wrote to Fannie Chester on September 18, 1864 to express his gratitude for the handmade gift.

Miss Fannie Chester.

*This is to show that I am the recipient, through the U.S. Sanitary Commission of the Patchwork bed cover or quilt, which you had a hand in constructing.*

*I am deeply sensible of the obligation I am under to you and your fair companions for this your contribution to my comfort... I am proud to testify to the many sterling virtues of New England women; endowed, generally, with rarest gifts of face and form, and educated in head and heart to adorn the loftiest sphere of the sex, the women of New England stand preeminent in the estimation of their countrymen as the truest sweethearts, the best wives, and most perfect mothers in the land.*

*I should be much pleased to hear that this note reached you in safety.*

R. Emmett Fisk

Fannie, at the age of 16 years old, felt that she was too young to reply to the letter from the soldier. She turned to her 18 year old sister, Lizzie, who was teaching school in South Windsor while living at home in Vernon. Lizzie agreed to write a reply to Captain Fisk and a correspondence began between the two young people.



Vernon, Oct. 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1864

Capt. R. E. Fisk

*A few days since, I had the pleasure of receiving two letters written by you addressed to my sister, Miss Fannie Chester and Lizzie C. Corbin. The former being at present busily engaged in school duties and the latter having reached the very mature age of (to use her own words) "two old last July." I have been deputed to answer the said communications...*

[Nov. 18, 1864]

*Often we at home are urged to write to our friends in the army, to cheer them in their loneliness, and to atone, in some measure, for the hardships they undergo for us. Again we are warned against a correspondence of this kind, and told that our letters are made subject of ridicule, but after carefully considering the pros and cons I have as you doubtless perceive, ventured to write again.*

*For two weeks past, I have been engaged in school, for you must know I have the honor to be a Yankee school-ma'am. Imagine me then surrounded by forty children? ranging in age from five to seventeen and possessing characters and acquirements as greatly varied as is this November weather...*

[March 16, 1865]

*The glad news of victory comes to us almost daily and in imagination we view the end of the great struggle...No more slavery. We are a free people in name only no longer. Is it not grand and glorious to live in an age like the present, to be a spectator of the wonderful changes, the rapid growth, the development, the triumph of truth in our land..*

*Will you allow the school ma'am "to tender her sympathy" for you in your arduous duties with the wish... to learn that you have passed safely through the contest.*

Your friend,

Lizzie Chester<sup>4</sup>

By July 1865 with the Civil War over, Robert Fisk had been discharged from the Army. He traveled to Vernon to meet Lizzie. Shortly after he arrived, he proposed on July 21, 1865 and Lizzie accepted. Their wedding had to wait until Robert established himself as a newspaper editor in the frontier town of Helena, Montana. They were married on March 21, 1867 in Vernon. During their honeymoon in New York City, they enjoyed the sights as Robert bought printing presses and newsprint for the Helena paper. Then they traveled west to Montana.

Lizzie set up housekeeping in Helena which at the time was a primitive mining settlement. She spent most of her married life there; raising six children and watching Helena evolve from a rough camp to a city that became the economic and social center for the region. During her time in Montana, Lizzie wrote letters home to her family in Vernon, chronicling her experiences and sharing her observations about life in the West. These letters were saved by her family and were later published in the book, *Lizzie: The Letters of Elizabeth Chester Fisk, 1864-1893*, edited by Rex C. Myers. Through the generosity of Geraldine Strong, a copy of this book is now part of the Vernon Historical Society's library.

After 1903, Robert retired from running the newspaper. He and Lizzie moved to Berkeley, California. Robert died in 1908. Lizzie survived him until in 1927. Robert's quilt was donated to a museum in California and is one of the few Sanitary Commission quilts in existence.

The quilt project initiated by the USSC has inspired a new generation of quilters. The Home of the Brave Quilt Project <http://www.homeofthebravequilts.com/History.php> began in Redlands CA in 2005 when a group of local quilters decided to honor military men and women who had died while in service in Iraq and Afghanistan by making quilts for their families. They stitch reproduction quilts based on the design of the Sanitary Commission quilts from the Civil War. Quilting chapters from all fifty states have sewn quilts to give to the families of the fallen. While chapters may receive donations, each quilt is made with supplies donated by the quilters themselves. This grassroots movement has been praised by military and political leaders as well as by quilting organizations. The appreciation and gratitude of the families who receive these heartfelt quilts inspire the quilters in their work.<sup>5</sup>

Locally, quilters at the First Congregational Church of Vernon are taking up their needles once more to make a Sanitary Commission quilt. As part of the church's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Women's Fellowship will sew one of these quilts using reproduction fabric in the colors of red, white and blue. The Anniversary Committee will present a program about Lizzie Chester Fisk entitled "Letters from Lizzie" at the church on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2012.

During the Civil War, women responded to the call from the Sanitary Commission for quilts and other supplies for the soldiers. This tradition continued through both World Wars I and II as women sent socks, sweaters, scarves and other items from home to the front. In the conflicts that have followed, handmade items from home whether from families or from caring strangers remind our service people far away that they are always in our thoughts as they carry out the difficult tasks set before them.

Sources cited:

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