



Buffalo Tales



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Gilbert "George" Fitch: Soldier, Carpenter, Quilter by Carol Bosshardt

For many years an old crazy quilt graced a rocker in the Freighter's Hotel at the Trails and Rails Museum. The tag on the quilt identified it as made by George Fitch, a Civil War Veteran who lived in Buffalo County during the 1910's. Fitch's quilt is known as a soldier quilt. Such quilts have been made by and for soldiers for centuries. Many mothers, sisters, and lovers stitched quilts to send to soldiers or to memorialize the service of their beloved soldier. This issue of *Buffalo Tales* introduces George Fitch, the maker of *Crazy Quilt*, and his family.

About five years ago this writer first visited Gladys Anderson, the delightful old lady who donated the quilt to the museum, and viewed an album in her possession. The album included a few pictures and many newspaper clippings pertaining to George and Olive Fitch, who she always called "Uncle George" and "Aunt Ollie." Since that time, Anderson's "Uncle George" and "Aunt Ollie" have become far more than a couple of old people who lived in Buffalo County from roughly 1910 to 1920. George is not just an old Civil War veteran who made quilts but he is part of an intriguing family whose history extends back to medieval England. The Fitches traveled fairly extensively in the United States during their lifetimes and survived a variety of challenges typical of their times. Fitch's *Crazy Quilt* includes a wide variety of images that represent important themes in the life of the Fitch family.



"It hurts" image is from a soldier quilt embroidered for or by Raymond Fry.

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Family was important to the Fitches, so it is not surprising that Anderson enjoyed sharing a quilt with the Trails and Rails Museum that her mother, Blanche King Stubbs, inherited from her Uncle George. Blanche was the step-daughter of George's brother, Alva, who married Blanche's mother (Alice King) after Alva's first wife died. Gladys remembered "Uncle George" making other quilts, but none of them have been discovered at this time.

Although Gladys is no longer available to share her family's history, a variety of census and genealogical sources added many details to George and Olive's story once George's legal name was discovered. George's name always appears in census material and family histories under some version of Gilbert G. or Gilbert Brockway George Fitch. His familiar name, George, will be used in this article. George was born May 19, 1843 in Youngstown, Ohio and died in 1926 in Berryville, Arkansas. George's parents were John Fitch and Elsa Lurenda Brockway, and "Aunt Ollie" was officially Olive A. Frazer.

One of Gladys's memories was that the Fitches were military men. George served with Company F of the Wisconsin 31st Regiment but returned to Ohio after the Civil War. Whether George lived temporarily in Wisconsin, or just volunteered with the Wisconsin regiment has not yet been established. Gladys's step grandfather, Alva Levi Fitch, was a Civil War Veteran. He served from January 1, 1864 to August 9, 1865 in Co. F, 14th Infantry of the Ohio Volunteers. Alva was known as one of Buffalo County's earliest residents and businessmen. One of his grandsons, Alva Revista Fitch (who was born 10 September 1907 in Amherst, Nebraska), gained fame as a Lieutenant General and POW in World War II. One of the saddest military connections is the information that George and Olive's youngest son, Alfred, was one of twenty-two Buffalo County men who gave their lives serving their country during World War I.

Several family tree records suggest other military or maritime connections that reach back beyond the Revolutionary War to fifteenth-century England. The titles, "Major" and "Captain" are attached to the names of many men in the family tree. The label "Captain" could have been a merchant designation for a ship's captain since many with that moniker lived in Connecticut. This interest in boats apparently passed down to George, even when he lived in landlocked Nebraska. Gladys remembered loving to go out in Uncle George's boat with her older brothers and sister, and a postcard housed at the Trails and Rails Archives shows George, Olive, Eli, and Alfred in a boat.

The Fitches apparently lived in at least three states—Ohio, Tennessee, and Arkansas—before they moved to Buffalo County. Gladys Anderson thought the family might have lived in Texas as well. George and Olive were married in January 1870, probably in Trumbull County, Ohio. A close look at the 1870 and 1880 Census records indicates that George and Olive lived with or next door to other relatives in Warren, Ohio for more than ten years. The 1879 Census does not identify family relationships, but remembering that George's mother's maiden name was Brockway makes the names of neighbors Electa Brockway and Calista Brockway interesting. Living in the Brockway residence was

Alfred T. Fitch, probably George's twenty-one year old brother. Electa and Calista were listed as "Keeping house" while Alfred's occupation was "Painting."

Census records can tell a researcher many personal details about people listed in the files. George Fitch, for example, was identified as owning less real estate than all but three other day laborers listed on the same 1870 census sheet as the Fitch family members. This should not be surprising, since he and Olive had been married fewer than five months and he, too, was a day laborer. George owned \$400 in real estate and \$100 in personal property while Electa (75 years old) owned \$1,200 in real estate and \$200 in personal property, and Calista (55 years) owned \$3,000 in real estate and \$300 in personal property.

By 1880 George and Olive's household had increased significantly, not only with the addition of their son, Eli, but because relatives from both the Fitch and the Frazer families had joined them. Electa had moved into George's home and is identified as "Aunt." Now she is listed as "At Home" rather than "Keeping House." Adaline Frazer, a "Domestic Servant," is listed as "Sister." The 1880 Census spelled Adaline's last name as Frayer, but her father's and mother's birth places match Olive's, and census records often are difficult to read and transcribe and occasionally mistakes were made in recording data.

The names Albert and Alfred often appear in Fitch records and with the questions about spelling already raised it is often difficult to identify whether Albert is the uncle or the son. One record suggests that Albert was born to George and Olive on May 10, 1873, but there is no death date. Since only their son Eli is mentioned on the 1880 Census record, Albert evidently died some time between 1873 and 1880.

By 1900 the Fitch family lived in Lees Creek Township in Washington County, Arkansas. Census data indicates that they now had another son, thirteen year-old son Alford C. who was reportedly born in Tennessee. Since most other records identify Alford C. who was reportedly born in Tennessee. Since most other records identify, "Alfred" as Eli's brother, the spelling is an apparent mistake on the census record. Several records identify Olive as the mother of three children "born" and two children "now living." Since there are fifteen or sixteen years difference between Eli and Alfred's ages, it is not surprising that George and Olive lost a child during that time. Childhood mortality was high in the nineteenth century and during their lifetimes George and Olive apparently suffered from both the childhood death of one of their sons and the adult death of another of their sons.

Although each census identified the Fitch men, particularly George, with different vocations, the jobs are all related. In 1900 George owned a farm, and he and both of his sons were identified as farmers. Although he was only thirteen, Alfred was identified as unemployed for ten months and attending school for two months. George and Eli were also unemployed for eight months. Could this mean they farmed for only four months of the year, or were they day laborers when they were not occupied by farming tasks.

Sometime around 1910 the Fitch family moved to Nebraska. A probate file for George's youngest son, Alfred C. Fitch, identifies the decade from 1913 to 1923 as the time the family lived in Nebraska.

Pleasanton is identified as the place of residence, although Miller, Watertown, and Burkett, Nebraska are also towns associated with Fitch. The family is listed in the 1910 Nebraska Census for Watertown and in the 1920 Nebraska Census for the Soldiers and Sailors Home in Hall County.

In the 1910 Buffalo County census, George and Eli, the oldest son, are listed as carpenters, who worked on their "own account." George was identified as working in a "Shop," so he may have owned his own business. In contrast, Eli and Alfred both did "Odd Jobs." Alfred was identified as a "laborer" who worked for someone else and had been unemployed for nine weeks in the previous year.

Gladys remembered "Uncle George" as a handyman who put wicker bottoms in chairs and was "never idle." She also remembered a bed frame and a chest of drawers that George made for her. The different jobs that George had in each census record testify to his capabilities as a "handyman," but he was more than a handyman. Gladys's memories suggest that George's listing as a "carpenter" on the 1910 Census may have been the most accurate as not every handyman made furniture or repaired wicker chair seats. George's craftsmanship also appears in the very different handicraft that pieced and embroidered *Crazy Quilt*. All of these activities indicate George's industry that kept his hands busy both indoors and outdoors.

Other interesting details about the family emerge from the 1910 Buffalo County census. The family "Rented" a "House" in Miller rather than a farm. The "U. A." notation identifies George as a veteran of the Union Army. George and Olive were sixty-eight and sixty-one on their previous birthdays, and Eli was thirty-eight and divorced, while Alfred was twenty-three and single.

Although Gladys thought none of George and Olive's children had married, other sources include additional information about Eli after he left Buffalo County. Eli was born May 6, 1871 and died in 1948. In 1908 he married Ella Sisco but by 1910 he was divorced. Eli didn't remarry until after his parents died. In 1927 Eli married Nettie Walker Martin, and their daughter, Betty Lou Fitch was born in



George and Olive Fitch

Oklahoma on December 1, 1929. Evidently Eli continued the mobile lifestyle of his parents. If an 1880 birth date was accurate for Nettie, she was a relatively old mother when Betty was born fifty-nine years later. In addition to the possibility of a mistake in the date Betty might also have been adopted. Betty married Ervin Vernon Hill, a native of Arizona, in 1948, and she died in 2000 in Arizona.

In addition to oral history passed on by *Crazy Quilt's* last private owner, family history and census records have helped piece together a fairly detailed picture of George and Olive Fitch. Their family, home, and faith sustained them through the loss of two children and through moves from Ohio through Tennessee and Arkansas to Nebraska and finally back to Arkansas. From life as a soldier before his marriage to life as a quilter at the end of his life, "Uncle George" lived a varied life. Even more can be learned about the family by a close look at George's *Crazy Quilt*. An upcoming edition of *Buffalo Tales* will look closely at both *Crazy Quilt* and its images.

About the Author: Carol Bosshardt began researching quilts as she wrote her master's thesis, "The Appealing Rhetoric of Two Contexts: My Antonia and Flower Basket Petit Point." This study of Grace McCance Snyder's quilts brought Carol an invitation to become a research associate for the National Quilter's Hall of Fame. Although her position as Director of Children's Ministry at First Paul's Lutheran Church in Hastings, doesn't give her much free time, Carol continues to enjoy studying quilts and quilters. Carol and her husband, Tom, have two adult daughters, Anne and Mary, who previously volunteered in the Trails and Rails gardens. Carol and Tom now live in Hastings.



Fitch Family

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From the Society:

Garden Walk to Benefit Howell Memorial Garden

Soil Sisters Garden Club will be sponsoring a Garden Walk on Saturday, June 19, 2004. A portion of the proceeds from the walk will benefit the Alice Howell Memorial Garden currently under construction at the Trails and Rails Museum.

Tickets are \$5.00 and are available at the Trails and Rails Museum, 710 West 11th Street or at the walk locations.

Hours for the walk are 9:30 a.m. to Noon. Seven gardens are featured in the walk.

For additional information and walk locations, please contact The Museum at 234-3041.

Trails & Rails Museum 710 West 11th Street (308) 234-3041

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