

**CAMILLE  
NIXDORF  
PHELAN  
1882-1946**



**OKLAHOMA  
MASTER  
QUILT  
MAKER**

Quilts are an excellent medium for telling a story too grand for words. Quilt blocks can act as book chapters, encouraging viewers to investigate further. The Oklahoma History Quilt is an embroidered masterpiece depicting 300 years of Oklahoma history, a testament to Camille Phelan's tenacity and love of history.

Camille Nixdorf was born in April 1882 in Miller County, Missouri. She studied at St. Joseph Academy in St. Louis, where arts education, particularly needlework, was a focus. In 1900, she married Dr. Joseph Phelan and the couple moved to Oklahoma City.

When she wasn't acting informally as her husband's nurse, Camille participated in the Neighborly Club that sponsored quilting parties. She designed several of the group's communal quilts before she worked on 'solo' quilting projects in the 1920s. Around 1928, Camille decided to make an embroidered record of Oklahoma's history – from Coronado's expedition in 1541 to 1931. She spent two years delving into old records, writing letters to historians, and consulting with people who actually made Oklahoma.

In 1935, Camille documented her process in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*. "My main object is to show the spirit of patriotism that motivated the great characters who made up the unique commonwealth Oklahoma." She selected prominent Oklahomans and events to be sketched on 51 quilt blocks. "I first selected pictures to be reproduced, then outlined in black thread to give it an outstanding effect, and used pastel colors to create individualized portraits. I spent four years in actual construction. After all the figures were finished, the quilting used twenty 100-yard spools of thread."

Camille organized her quilt to include Army forts, agreements with American Indian nations, early settlement attempts by boomers, land runs, Guthrie Statehood Day, and political leaders. It also features facilities and leaders in education, Indian art, oil drilling, cattle ranching, and business. After exhibiting her quilt at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair, Camille presented it to the Oklahoma Historical Society in 1935. Due to its age and weight, it is currently not on display. View the quilt online at <http://www.millercountymuseum.org/archives/100802.html>.

In 1937, Camille completed her second major quilt – History of America – featuring a United States map and its surrounding territories, including Alaska and Hawaii. Each state included its capital, state flower and a famous citizen. Portraits of the presidents from Washington to Franklin Roosevelt, along with their First Ladies, traveled around the border.

It also contained 150 prominent figures such as Susan B. Anthony, John D. Rockefeller, John Jacob Actor, Will Rogers, and Bing Crosby – and her own self-portrait – and images of over fifty landmarks including Niagara Falls, Statue of Liberty, and Empire State Building as well as Columbus' landing through Chicago's 1933 World's Fair, showing the Oklahoma History Quilt display.

Camille Nixdorf Phelan died in July 1946 at age 64 in Oklahoma City. After a mention of a 'national quilt' in a 1946 article, it was believed lost until it surfaced at a 1983 rural New York auction. The quilt finally sold at a 2015 online auction for \$19,200.