



Pineapple

EMMA LOUISE RILEY
SMITH

ca. 1920

EMMA Louise Riley Smith made this vibrant Pineapple appliqué quilt. Born to James Wesley Riley, a farmer and former slave, in Arkansas in 1881, Emma moved with her family to Liberia when she was fourteen, fulfilling her great-grandfather's long-standing wish for the family to "return to Africa."⁵ Emma lived in Liberia for fifteen years, but after her brother and parents had died, she yearned to see her American family. Accompanied by her younger sister Thelma, who had been born in Liberia, Emma moved back to the United States around 1910 or 1912. She spent some time with relatives in Arkansas before eventually making her way to Butte, where she married Martin Luther Smith in 1913. Later, the family moved to Lewistown, where Emma earned money as a laundress and Martin worked as a cook for the Milwaukee Road. Then the family moved again, this time to Great Falls, where Martin worked as a cook for the Great Northern Railroad.

As an African American woman, Emma was certainly in the minority in Montana, but a few small, thriving urban black communities had begun to develop in the state around the turn of the century. Helena, in fact, boasted the second-oldest black community in the Pacific Northwest. The mining boom that began in 1864 drew the first African Americans to the city, and by the 1890s Helena had black-owned barber shops, a grocery store, and a saloon as well as black churches, fraternal groups, and a women's benevolent association. Although not all black communities were as large as Helena's, Butte and Great Falls also had African American churches, and Kalispell, Butte, Anaconda, Billings, and Bozeman had black women's clubs.

In Great Falls, Emma was an active member of the African American Union Bethel Church, where she served as conference secretary for the church's board of trustees and president of the Women's Missionary Mite Society. Emma was a prolific and talented quilter and often raffled her quilts as part of her exhaustive fund-raising for the society. Her daughter Lucille Thompson registered fourteen of her quilts with the Montana Historic Quilt Project.

Emma's graceful Carolina Lily quilt, pictured on this page, is of special historic significance. Emma started the quilt while still living in Liberia and finished it after she moved to Montana.



(opposite) Pineapple, Emma Louise Riley Smith, ca. 1920, MHQP 06-103-09 (72" x 94", cotton)

(right) Emma Louise Riley Smith with her daughters (left to right) Madeline Smith (Haskins Clark), Lucille W. Smith (Thompson), and Alma Smith (Jacobs)

(above right) Carolina Lily, Emma Louise Riley Smith, ca. 1920, MHS 1995.84.06 (pieced and appliquéd, 72" x 78", cotton)

