

Quilting: A Generational Art Form in the Mountains



The last colorful appliqued quilt made by Gladys Coffey that I was honored with by her family

Upon moving to the Blue Ridge Mountains, I began to notice there was always a common thread woven into the older women's conversations. Invariably the talk would center around handwork; quilting in particular. I would listen with interest as Nin and Eva Coffey would relate how they would finish their everyday work around their cabins and look forward to lowering down their quilting frames from the rafters to work on a colorful new pattern they had started.

The mountain women at that time had no electricity to generate power for television and such so they relied on old-time crafts to keep their hands occupied and their hearts fulfilled. Quilting not only provided intimate company between other women but also provided families with warm coverings for the winter months. And there was a certain satisfaction in piecing different color combinations together that was uniquely their own. After Nin Coffey died, our family bought her and Johnny's home in Love and in the attic, we found bags stuffed with cut quilt pieces where she had stored them for future use.

While attending Mt. View Mennonite Church, the ladies got together one day a week and worked around a large frame stretched with a new quilt, stitching away as they talked. Like the old adage says, “Many hands make light work,” and before you knew it, there was a beautiful quilt to be given to someone in need, a new mother, or as a donation to the Mennonite Relief Sale held in the fall of each year. Ladies from the Mennonite/Amish faiths worked on these quilts all year long and the monies collected from the sale went to the various organizations, helping people in need. Watching these women sew was like watching a precision machine as they made perfect tiny stitches in the fabric of the quilt. They invited me to come and learn but looking at my large, haphazard stitches, one lady said, “put her on the “cut-out” table. My dear friend, Gladys Coffey, as tactful as ever, said my true talents lay elsewhere.



Ladies from the Pilgrim Fellowship Church stitching a quilt

Speaking of Gladys, she was one of the most talented quilters I ever met. Like Nin and Eva, Gladys always had her quilting frame set up with colorful, intricate patterns taking shape. There’s no telling how many quilts Gladys made in her lifetime. I know she made one for all of their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren plus many other family members and friends. One year for Christmas, her daughter-in-law, Sharry, returned the favor by making Boyd and Gladys a quilt depicting the different phases of their lives. Gladys was thrilled and displayed the quilt with pride.



Gladys Coffey working on a quilt with a flower motif

Betty, Carol Jean and Judy, her three daughters, honored me when they presented me with the last quilt their mother made before her death in July of 2007. It is a beautiful appliqued quilt of pastel flowers on a pale green background that was laid across her casket in place of the traditional spray of roses.

I treasure it more than the girls' will ever know and each time I see it, in my mind's eye, I see Gladys stitching away. See Gladys's quilt, hanging on our back fence in the photo pictured above.

Hazel Fitzgerald of Beech Grove was always one of my favorite people to visit. I'd stop by on my way home from delivering the Backroads to take Hazel a newspaper and she would talk about growing up here on the mountain. One day as I was preparing to leave, she called me into her bedroom to give me something she made. It was an intricate "bow tie" pattern quilt with all my favorite colors that I still use today.

Vera Falls was another long-time quilter. Vera, who passed away on September 25, 2020, posed for one of my favorite quilting photos. I've used this particular picture in many of my writings because it depicts the color and beauty of a hand-sewn quilt and the face and hands of the one who made it. Vera said she learned the art as a young teenager from her grandmother, Nannie Coffey. When asked what the first pattern was that she worked on, Vera said it was a "crazy quilt," made up of different colors and fabrics cut out of old clothing. We think recycling is a new trend, but the mountain people were way ahead of their time in the reuse of many everyday materials. Some of Vera's favorite patterns include the "Rail Fence," "Wedding Ring," "Two Patch," and her personal favorite, the "Monkey Wrench," which is the design she's made



Hazel with her "Bow Tie" quilt



Vera working on a "Rail Fence quilt

most often. Vera said she enjoys solitary quilting but has always enjoyed sewing with her sister, Vivian Allen and also Margie Ramsey and Daisy Demastus. The ladies would spend the day together, talking as they stitched away. Vera and Vivian, who often worked together on a single quilt project, made the colorful "Rail Fence" quilt that Vera showed me on the day I came out to take her picture.

Another prolific quilter is Lura Steele. Lura always seemed to be working on another pattern for as long as I've known her. Going into the guest bedroom of her house, the bed is stacked high with finished quilts of every pattern and hue. Lura learned the art from her family members and in turn, has taught her daughter Ann and Ann's daughter. I gave a program about the mountain people in Charlottesville several years ago and was honored to have Lura and Ann come to tell people about quilting and show some of their most colorful work. The people at the program loved it!

In the February 1993 issue of Backroads, I interviewed Patsy Weaver who is also one of the most avid quilters I ever made acquaintance with. She gave me a wealth of information about how she started making quilts and the personal satisfaction it brings her. As a small child, Patsy learned the art of quilting from her grandmother who gave her little jobs of threading needles and handing her pieces of material when she needed them. When she was five years of age, her grandmother began teaching her how to piece and from that time on, Patsy made quilting a lifelong hobby.

Her formal introduction to quilt making came at eighteen years of age when she married Jason Weaver and began attending the quilting bees held at her church. That's when the true enjoyment of the craft became her passion and she's been at it ever since. The Weaver's home is filled with beautiful quilts Patsy has made along with heirloom quilts that have been in their family for generations. She showed me a woven wool coverlet that is over 125 years old as well as two quilts made for her and Jason's wedding by their respective mothers. Jason's mother made a "Double Wedding Ring" pattern that was pieced together from some of Jason's sister's childhood dresses. Patsy's mother fashioned a "Dresden Plate" quilt out of her sister's clothing.

Patsy says the trick to a good quilting stitch is having at least eight to ten uniform stitches per inch. Usually the higher stitches per inch, the better the quilter. "And the mark of a good quilter," laughs Patsy, "Is someone who has one in a frame, is piecing or appliqueing one, cutting one out, buying material for another and has ten patterns in her head!"

In today's fast paced world, many women simply do not have time to do hand stitching. Patsy adds, "People are tired of things that don't last. They want to get back to the old traditions that really mean something; that have a part of someone tied to it."

Over the years I have been living here, so many of the women I've interviewed were experts in the art of quilting. LaRue Wilson, Lorean Falls, Mabel Napier and others learned the craft early and have continued to sew.



Lura showing a "Dresden Plate" quilt



Patsy Weaver working on another of her beautiful quilts



LaRue Fauber Wilson



Lorean Falls Painter



Mabel Truslow Napier

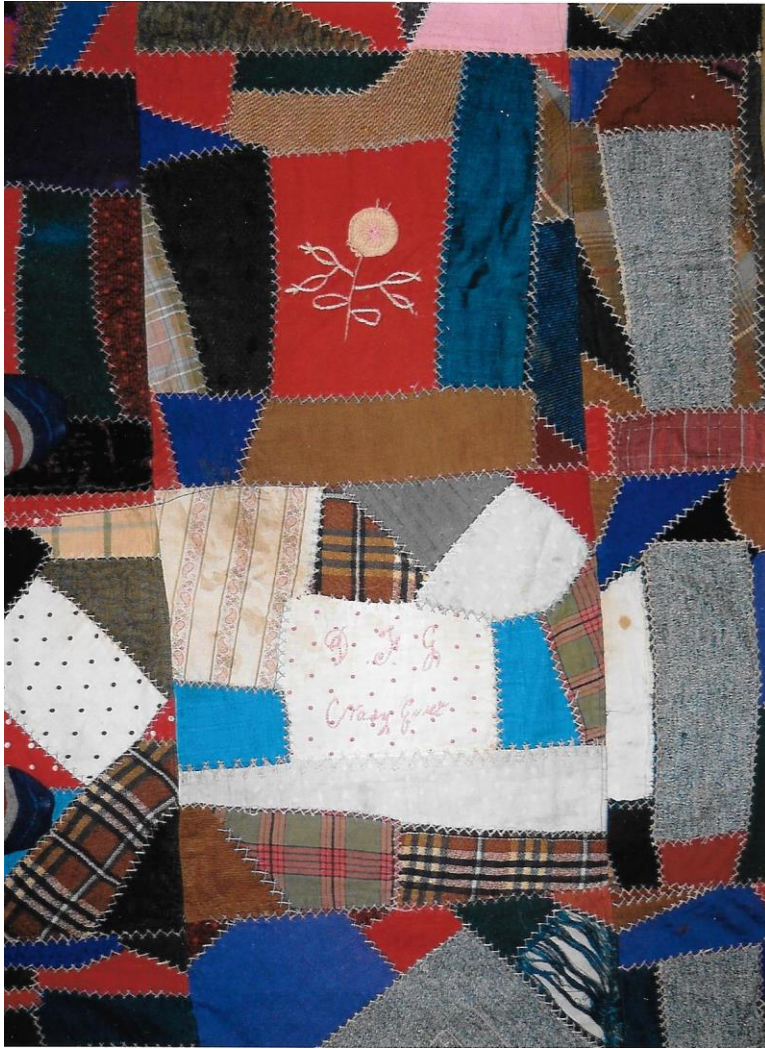
In the January 1983 Backroads, Bunny Stein wrote a wonderful article about quilting that provides even more background to the age-old craft of making “bed covers” that in the beginning was a necessity in the home. I was honored to reprint it in the Backroads book, “The Road to Chicken Holler” and now once again for the Nelson County Historical Society Backroads blog.

Centuries ago, in order to have any kind of material, it first had to be grown, spun on a wheel, and placed on a loom to become a piece of cloth. No one who ever had to go through this process ever forgot the enormous amount of work that went into its creation.

During the olden days, the piecing and patching of fragments was considered a sign of thriftiness and with this innate respect for the value of material, many women unconsciously developed into “artists in scraps.”

Since bedding took primary place as a necessity in the home, the scrap bag was filled with carefully sorted rags; the best ones to be used for quilts while the rest cut into strips to make rag rugs. After the urgent necessity of supplying adequate bedcovering for the family was fulfilled, the making of quilts for display evolved into an artistic outlay for women whose ingenious minds and clever fingers created many intricate designs.

The “Crazy Quilt,” the earliest type made, was not considered a design. They were mere constructions of leftovers. When enough pieces were collected, they were sewn together in a mosaic fashion, resulting in a useful covering that would last not only decades, but also centuries. These quilts were constant reminders of the clothes that each member had worn or of an old tablecloth or worn-out curtains because they were all part of the mosaic design in the crazy quilt.



A colorful antique "Crazy Quilt"

Bunny talked to Daisy Fitzgerald of Reed's Gap and learned that because her family lived in a remote area where material was not only hard to come by, but too costly to buy so they coveted every scrap of fiber that wasn't in use. They saved every piece they could find to make quilts with. Daisy said that many times there would be an exchange of fabrics among friends and relatives. "Piece bags" would be brought out and passed around from hand to hand and traded so that each one could add some color and variety to the different patterns.

Young girls learned early in life how to sew and piece a quilt. They learned much about style, color, and design but they also learned the infinite lesson of patience as they sat quietly for many hours alongside mothers and friends. In this activity, a girl was creating a thing of beauty and usefulness,

which, I'm sure, gave her a great deal of satisfaction. As girls got older, they began to think about their dowry and no girl would dream of getting married before she had prepared an ample supply of quilts for her new home.

There are two techniques for making quilts; that of piecing like the crazy quilt and that of appliqued variety. Both can be combined on the same article. Cutting out patches of material makes appliqueing to the shape designed and hemming them down on a plain background. This technique allows a big variety in design. The stitchery known as "quilting" is a term applied to the sewing of a running stitch along a line previously marked out, in order to unite the several layers of cloth that the quilt is made of; like the top, the filling and the bottom. The designs of quilt stitches range from straight to elaborate scrolling, floral and leaf designs.

Before any of this elaborate needlework can be done however, the patterns, having been decided on, must be marked out, appliqued, then the whole finished top, along with the filling and backing must be put on a quilting frame which is made of wood and constructed somewhat like curtain stretchers (if anyone can remember those!) These frames can be adjusted to the size of the quilt.

The quilt must then be basted on or pinned onto a heavy piece of canvas or cloth already attached to each bar of the frame.

Quilting was an occupation usually saved for the winter months when the daily chores were all done and when preparations for providing the winter food store were behind and there were fewer demands on the woman's time. Out would come the quilting frame to be set up in a warm corner of the house or lowered down from the rafters where it was raised when not in use.

No woman quilted alone if she could help it. In the old days when there were fewer social activities, the women would get together for a "quilting bee," which was a form of entertainment in which the hostess, in exchange for one or two good meals, received the pooled needlework of a group of her friends.

Quilting today is one of the most popular needlework arts in America. It has branched out into many other art forms where creativity is unlimited. Pillows, wall hangings, pictures, clothing and now even antique quilts are being used to reupholster furniture and made into stuffed toys.

The women of yesteryear did most of the sewing by hand. In fact, Gladys Coffey never used a sewing machine in the making of quilts or any other handwork. When the sewing machine came around, it made things easier but destroyed some of the craftsmanship and pride in the work of one's own hand. The machine took over and store-bought material replaced the spinning wheel and loom, which were resigned to the attic along with the coalscuttle and rolling pin!

There are still women today sewing by hand and have revived the old craft of quilt making, spinning and weaving. They are producing some of the old patterns, which seem to be the most popular today. If a woman can follow the printed word and hold a needle, she can achieve a reasonable facsimile, if not as good a quilt, as her grandmother, or at least a close second!



The hardworking hands of Vera Coffey Falls stitching a "Rail Fence" quilt