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Old Quilts and Hillsdale Tobacco



BY
NINA Q. BARNES



Nevvie was quilting up every tiniest fragment of cloth from the scrap basket. The smaller scraps were made into Grandmother's Flower Garden, Star, and Crazy Quilts.

"Whatcher sewin' them strings onto them newspapers fer?" Grandpa spat and questioned.

Nevvie grinned at the grizzled old man, still dark and strong as an ox, his Indian blood evident in his strong featured face.

"This here's the String Pattern. I sew these long strings of scraps to it first, then trim them down to the patterns. Here's a finished one, four inches square. These are 'jined' to these black squares like a checkerboard."

Grandpa slapped his thigh and chuckled, "By hand, we can set on the bed and play checkers on it."

Nevvie had her treadle sewing machine going smooth and steady, fabric passing evenly between her hands, under the presser foot, curling in a heap on the floor.

"Mama, the quilt is getting on the floor," her twin boys ran around the machine, watching the seam forming on the selvedge of the fabric.

"Look, Mama, I can see the spool. You're running out of thread."

Nevvie's voice was soft and wooly, "Yes, I been watchin' it disappear off the bobbin, too."

"Can we get you another spool, Mama?"

"Do you want white or black?"

She marvelled how those two could always guess what the other would say next, as the boys jumped around her, wanting her to choose, "Me first, I asked first."

"No," she sighed. "There ain't no more thread." She began folding the half-made quilt into a clean, white sheet; keep that awful dust offen it. "But you can he'p me sweep this dust up."

She looked where the sky ought to be. Dust. Dust blowin' to where the sun was hid. Dust seepin' through ever' chink and crack in the walls and winders. Dust seepin' under the door; it looked like the sand in the crick, sorta like marcelled hair, little ripples of waves and ridges as it heaped higher behind the door hinge, sorter like a fold-up fan half-open.

The twins ran for the broom and dustpan. She wet the broom in a water bucket and swept easy so as not to stir up the dust. They held the pan and a kraft bag. She swept, they poured. They poured dust into the bag until it was half full, and about all one of them could lug.

One twin was tall and dark, with brown hair; his Grandpa tagged him "Blackie." The other was fair and short, with black hair, "Shorty" was his nickname.

"Blackie, honey, would you take down them clothes that's dry, and lay them on the table and fold 'em? You'll be through before I get dinner cooked," Nevvie said.

"Shorty, honey, fetch me that shoulder meat from the storeroom."

"The wind is making those ghost sounds," Blackie said.

"Mama, that noise makes me shiver."

Grandpa mended tack and harness. "Prob'ly the no-headed dog." Grandpa delighted in their fright; the No-Headed Dog was one of his best tales. They all stopped and listened.

"Sounds like the mule to me," said Nevvie.

"The menfolks are coming in for their dinner.

"Kin you boys put off that laundry and set the plates?" she asked them.

"Yes, ma'am," they said, "one, two, three,

four,..."

"...five, six, seven, eight," the other said.

The back door was in the lee of the wind; it burst open and the four men whacked dust off their hats and bandanas before they hurried inside. Muddy circles defined where they had moved the bandanas over their noses to breathe through.

"Mind, put your bandanas in that pan of cold water to soak, else the mud will stain," Nevvie said.

"Better empty your pockets," Dad said.

Crouching over the dust bag, each one turned up his front pockets and poured out the dust. Dust lined the creases where they squinted their eyes; they had tied one bandana over their ears, and another over their nose and mouth, like desperados.

The boys greeted their Dad and the uncles, "Howdy."

"I'm full of grit, and spit," allowed Grandpa. He spit tobacco juice with deadly aim, poured water from the dipper into the wash pan and began splashing his face and head. "Nivver could stand sand in my hair," he snorted.

The men each took a turn at the bucket and pail.

"Did you get the cotton in, Daddy?"

Dad took one boy on each knee. "Now that's a hard thing, boys," he said. "I reckon that cotton seed has blowed clear to the North Pole by now, right alongside all the topsoil that use to be this h'yar farm."

Nevvie served up a heaping platter of fried shoulder and red-eye gravy, and hot biscuits from a long, black bake tin.

"Fried 'taters!" exclaimed Zip.

"Pass them beans," Whis said.

"Fine lookin' meal, Nevvie," said Ap.

"Is the field corn lookin' any good?" asked Nevvie.

They all shook their heads. Despair was contagious from their slumped shoulders, their look of hopelessness; despair swept the table. It was like a black crow sitting on her shoulder. She

turned away, put a stick of wood under the hot-water reservoir of her iron stove, so there would be hot water to wash up the dishes. She took two quilted pads in her hand and brought the coffee pot to the table, still perking. The pot reminded her of bird eggs; a smile lightened her eyes and was gone again.

"More coffee." It was a fact. They always drank all the coffee.

"Can we have some coffee, too, Mama?" Shorty said.

"Please, Mama?" Blackie pleaded.

"Well, all right," said their mama.

She got their mugs and poured milk almost full, then added a few tablespoons of the hot coffee and a teaspoon of sugar. She gave them the mugs with the teaspoons standing in them, just like grandpa's.

"Sip from the spoon, boys," allowed grandpa with a nod of his head. "You dassn't burn yourselves."

"Yessir." They were pleased the old man took account of them.

The men washed up again, took down the white starched shirts she had ironed for them. It was a time they looked for all week. Saturday afternoon, work finished for the week, go to town for supplies for the week coming up.

"I declare, Nevvie, I don't see how you got these shirts white when the air is thick with dirt. Seems to me they would a'been pure mud oncer you had 'em wet," Zip said.

He admired himself in the piece of mirror in his hand. Nevvie watched him a moment.

"I used up all my thread today. I need a spool of white thread to finish that quilt. And get me a needle, too."

She spoke to Zip. He was the first son; he was the head of the family behind the old man, even above her husband. The other men did not seem to be concerned with their part in the "pecking order", but it bothered Nevvie that she had no help from them in the house, yet she often worked alongside them in the fields, and her husband was "bossed" equal to the little boys.

She was the oldest in her family, and used to being responsible for a household and she knew she was good at it; now, here she was, treated like a servant girl, while she took care of five grown men and two little boys. But the Indian ways demanded respect to the Chief, which was Grandpa, and to the elders, which was eldest to youngest sons. They were good-looking men, and proud, and she turned them out nice. They approved of her skills, though it was not the Indian way to compliment wimmenfolk.

"This drought is wiping us out, third year in a row. We have to buy more cotton seed, but what little of the soil was left, is up there in the sky and in that brown bag." Zip's mouth was set in a grim line.

"We ain't got corn left to grind to meal today," he said as the five struggled out the door, tying down their bandanas again, dripping wet. They'd be blowed dry long afore they made it to town.

"Boys, get dishtowels and help with these dishes. I want to mop this floor when we're through," Nevvie said.

She put hot water in the mop bucket. "Blackie, get me a scoop of those ashes. I want lye water for this dirt floor. Can't take chances on any more consumption or diptheria," she said.

"Mama, it's blowing in faster than you can mop it up," Blackie said.

"Still, we must try our best," Mama said.

The boys kept busy with their books to pass time that afternoon. They enjoyed school and excelled in work. Nevvie crocheted yarn into a layette for the expected baby.

It was past dark, past suppertime when the men got back from town. They had brought sugar, flour, cornmeal, lard, molasses, honey, coffee, peanut butter, and five bags of Hillsdale tobacco. Nevvie eyed the tobacco with suspicion.

She waited for them to unload the bags. Waited for the needle and thread. She wanted that quilt finished before the baby came.

Finally, she spoke. "Did you get the needle

and thread?"

"No, we didn't have no money left after we bought the tobakker," Zip said.

"A nickel for a spool of thread and a penny for a needle? You didn't have six cents?" Nevvie was not convinced.

"Sorry, Nevvie. We got the seed on the credit, and them staples took the rest of our 'roll. We got to have our tobakker."

"Boys, bring granddad that packet of cigarette skins; I need to roll one," granddad said. "And bring my tobakker."

Nevvie watched the men shake out a row of tobacco onto the paper, moisten the edge of the cigarette paper, licking it, rolling it up into a slender cigarette. She watched the four men shake tobacco from the Hillsdale pouches...four pouches, about 15 inches deep and ten inches wide and seamless, the bag was woven around and around in one continuous thread...THREAD! Right in front of her nose was yards of thread to finish the quilt!

Nevvie was humming a hymn to herself Sunday morning when she decided to empty the tobacco into clean molasses pails. She washed out the bags and hung them to dry. After church she began ravelling the thread from the bags, winding it on empty spools; she kept every empty spool.

Monday morning after breakfast she used the thread and finished the quilt. She was still singing at dark.

The skies continued gray and sickly for months. Banks failed, farms were ruined, people left and didn't come back.

Nevvie had her baby in due time; they were all plum fools over little Virginia. The next winter she fell sick with pneumonia, and died during a storm. The boys walked seven miles in the mud and rain from Uncle's house. She wrapped them in the quilt, to get the chill out.

The war broke out. Shorty went to the Aleutians with the Navy Seabeas. Dad developed cancer of the throat, they thought from mustard gas in France in the First War. The quilt covered

him.

Shorty finally married. Three years later, Dad died of the cancer.

She went to visit Shorty and stayed two months. They laughed a lot.

"Don't you have some quilts, honey? I'm cold," Nevvie said.

"No, my mother makes quilts, but she hasn't made one for me," replied the daughter-in-law. "I embroider, but I can't quilt. Here is a blanket for your bed; we have blankets."

She came for two months in the fall; she arrived with a 'secret smile' on her face. She brought two suitcases instead of one.

"Shorty, honey, hand me that suitcase," Nevvie said.

She opened it and took out two quilts, a little faded, a little worn, but made with her big, capable hands. "I know you need kivvers," she said. "I have lots of old quilts. I'm giving these to you." She was smiling that smile.

"I want you to have this one here. One year when the crops failed, I had to ravel out tobakker sacks for the thread..."

A letter came to Shorty from Helen, a childhood chum:

"I was saddened at the news of your mother's death, still keeping her house and garden at ninety, -- I remembered my young years at Babbs.

"I always stopped in on my way home from school and she would give me a great big cold biscuit. I'd poke a hole in it and she would fill it with molasses. Her sheets were all snow-white, embroidered and ironed, covered with hand-made old quilts. You boys wore the whitest starched shirts."

The old quilt with the black squares standing on their points, sewn with thread unravelled from Hillsdale Tobacco sacks, has proved as tough and enduring as the people of Western Oklahoma who dug in their heels and survived the Dust Bowl. ■