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AN OLD CRAFT THAT NEVER DIES

By Donita Lucas Shields

About four years ago, Old Town Museum in Elk City provided an outstanding exhibition of some of the finest handmade quilts and wall hangings in Western Oklahoma.

Many of these articles were made by Western Oklahoma Quilters' Guild, which meets monthly in Clinton. Prior to its organization in 1983, most of the charter members belonged to Oklahoma Quilters' Guild in Oklahoma City. The group now has a good number of members living in Weatherford, Clinton, Cordell, Sentinel, Hobart, Elk City, Cheyenne, and one member in Canada.

The purpose of Quilters' Guild is to preserve techniques of piecing, appliqueing, and quilting. Members are especially interested in reviving antique designs that have been handed down during the past 150 years. They are constantly discovering patterns that are variations of the old originals.

The quilt showing, which was part of Western Oklahoma Historical Society's Summer Series, contained approximately sixty handmade items. One room at the museum was devoted to antique quilts more than fifty years old. This display included such patterns as "Starry Path," "Grandmother's Basket," "Wedding Ring," and "Log Cabin."

Members of the Quilters' Guild served as guides who explained the art of piecing and quilting and its historical significance. According to the Guild's president, Mrs. Vicki Bishop of Clinton, "Log Cabin" and "Pine Tree" were favorites of early-day Western Oklahoma pioneer women. These patterns originated in the 1800's in New England and moved west as home seekers searched for new lands. Variations of "Log Cabin" became known as "Straight Furrow," "Barn Raisin," and "Courthouse Steps."

Another old pattern revived by the Guild was first known as "Bear's Paw" and was a New England creation. It was developed during the 1840's and was also called "Duck's Foot in the Mud" and "Hand of Friendship." Another interesting antique pattern which is still popular today was first known as "Drunkard's Path" and later as "Robbing Peter to Pay Paul." This old Quaker pattern from Ohio has an intricate design with circular pieces cut out of opposite corners and stitched together.

Many Quilters' Guild members devote their time and expertise in re-creating complicated antique patterns. A beautiful example of hours of hard work and tiny stitches was evident in "Grandmother's Flower Garden," a colorful array of more than three thousand one-inch hexagon patches sewed together by hand. "Flying Goose" and its companion "Goose Tracks" gave a beautiful example of what can be designed with small equilateral triangles. Judy Reeder of Burns Flat presented her triangle shapes in "Shades of the Rainbow," a variation of the old "Bow Tie" pattern.

Other complex patterns in the quilt showing included "Dresden Plate," the "Lone Star," or "Texas Star," "Grandmother's Fans," "Jacob's Fan," "Wedding Ring," and "Dutch Boy and Girl." An original design, "Blue Bonny Star," by Janet Bonny of Burns Flat, was most eye-catching. Another, a modern-day "Jeans Quilt," by Mrs. Walter Miller of Cordell, gave an attractive appliqued and embroidered pictorial history of her son's school days.

Piecing quilts is a precision craft of carefully cutting and then sewing together geometric figures—circles, squares, rectangles, triangles, diamonds, and hexagons. Whatever the design, the tiny patches must always revolve into a perfect square known as a block. These blocks are stitched together to make the top. After the top is completed, it is then marked for quilting or is tacked to its batting and back.

Anyone who pieces a quilt discovers that the cutting and sewing is a delightful challenge as well as a form of relaxation. Assembling the tiny patches is much like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. Many people who enjoy piecing and quilting often pursue the art of quilt-making as a lifelong hobby. ●

This article—now updated—first appeared in the August 8, 1985 edition of THE SENTINEL LEADER.

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