

Threads through Time

BY *Andi Diehn*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Jon Gilbert Fox*

The members of the Sunshine Quilters Guild — women in their spry 70s, a mom sitting next to her grown daughters, women still dressed in their professional clothes — sit in a circle in the basement of Grantham Town Hall. At their feet rest canvas bags overflowing with unfinished quilt blocks, vibrant materials, pattern books and, in one case, diapers. For centuries, women, and occasionally men, have gathered to put needles to



(Above) *Catee Hubbard's Alaskan quilt has a center eagle with the Northern Lights above and salmon leaping below*

(Right) *Detail of Elaine Pillsbury's split 16 block sampler "Dare to be Different"*



work to join backing, batting and front layers into quilts. The advent of sewing machines and longarm quilting machines has altered the scene somewhat; quite often, a quilt is not actually being worked on where quilters gather, but still they meet to share their work, their ideas, their problems and their time.

"One night, all we talked about was cooking!" laughs Linda Martin of Grantham, a founding member of the Sunshine Quilters Guild. But don't be fooled. Notice the dazzling and varied quilts displayed on a nearby table, all part of a guild challenge for which members designed and sewed quilts from the theme "Under the Boardwalk, Down by the Sea." Two



Members of the Sunshine Quilters Guild (left to right): Catee Hubbard, Betty Lutsky, Linda Martin (showing her hand-quilted sampler quilt) and Elaine Pillsbury, the owner of the Sunshine Carousel Quilt Shop, with one of her quilts on her lap

members hold up a queen-size quilt between them and there's a gasp of appreciation. Their love for color, fabric and design is obvious — their work is exquisite.

For some people, quilting is a creative outlet that can be accomplished while they watch television. For others, like Suzanne LeBlanc of Autumn Harvest Farm and Quilt Studio in Grafton, it's both a passion and a business. For Julie Crossland of the New Hampshire Quilt Documentation

Project, it's a way to preserve the cultural heritage of our state and country. Still others simply love swaths of carefully crafted material under which to fall asleep on a frosty winter night.

Stitched in time

Quilts are by no means original to America. They came with settlers from Europe, Asia and India, and evolved along with the country as historic events provided inspiration; fabric became lasting and widely available; and patterns were shared among friends, churches,

towns and eventually through magazines, books and the Internet. Here in New Hampshire, where the winter winds blow cold and even summer nights often require a little extra covering, quilting is an obvious art.

The quilts being made today are much different than those stitched by our great grandmothers and great-great grandmothers.

“Women used to use old clothes, anything you had to use up,” says

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LeBlanc, who operates a longarm quilting machine and does custom quilting for clients. “You didn’t go out and buy fabric. It wouldn’t cost anything to make a quilt, you just used the dress you were going to throw away.”

Now, though choices are no longer limited to what a family has been wearing the past several years, people still choose that aesthetic for sentimental

reasons. LeBlanc holds up a box filled with T-shirts sent by a woman who wants to give a quilt to the boy who has long since outgrown the faded shirts.

Julie Crossland knows the importance of a quilt’s history. She heads the New Hampshire Quilt Documentation Project, Phase II, the goal of which is to document every quilt in the state made before 1976. New Hampshire residents take their family quilts out of their

homes to wherever the project volunteers are stationed on a particular date — library, school, town hall, recreation center — and offer them up to quilting experts.

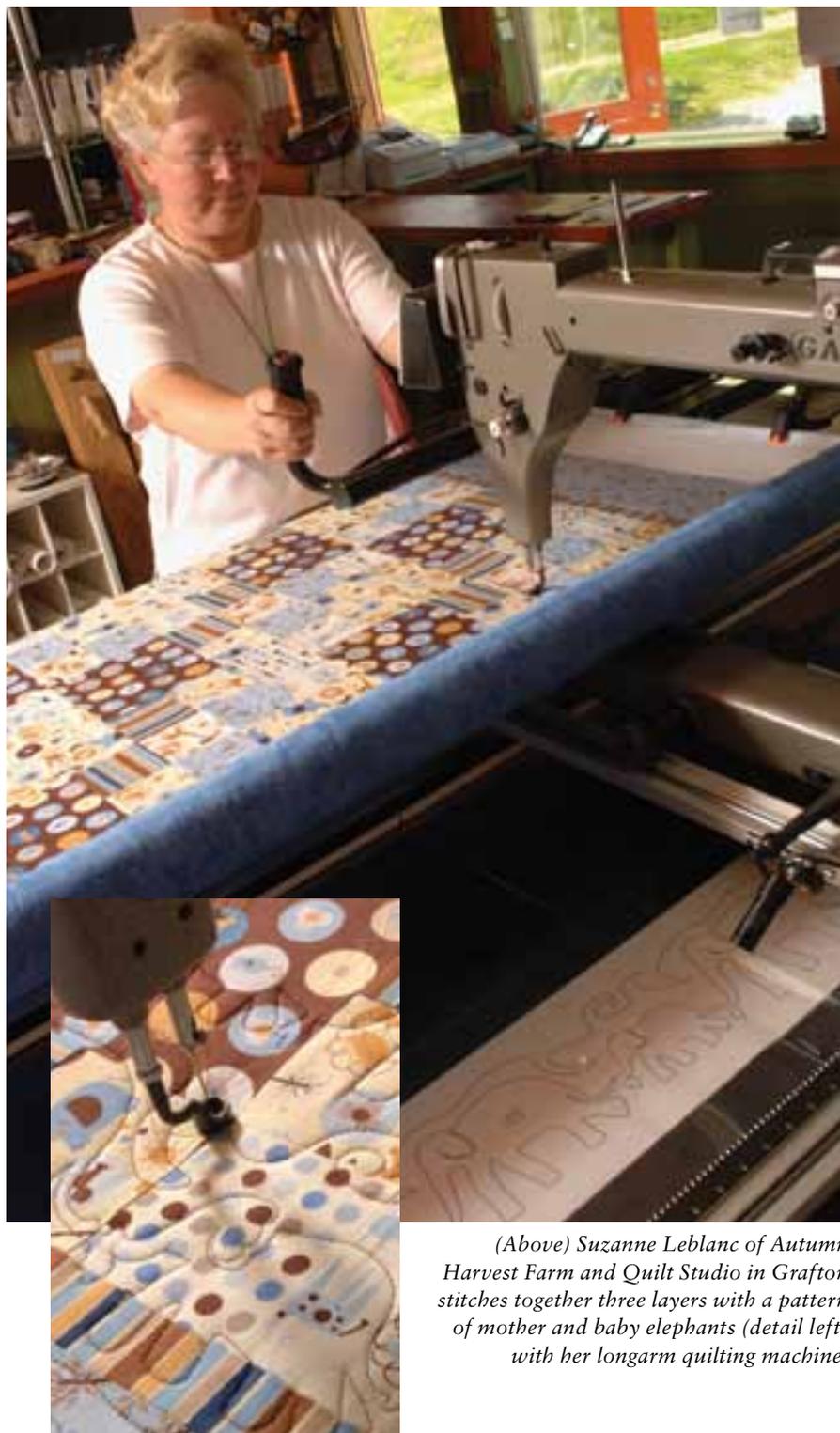
“We document the pattern and give a circa date within a 20-year period,” Crossland explains as her quilting machine hums in the background at her home in Hudson. “Then they can pretty much tell which family member made the quilt. It’s a great service.”

Crossland, a certified quilt appraiser, along with her team of volunteers, can estimate a date by examining the type of fabric, the color, how the color has faded, and the details in the printing. Last year, the project visited New London in July and October, and 72 quilts were documented.

So far, the project has documented 2,600 quilts in New Hampshire, and is not yet finished. Crossland and her volunteers have begun work on a book of New Hampshire quilts and their makers. “I love to find letters or diaries with the quilts and really feel the presence of the women who made them,” she says. “Women documented every piece of history. There are temperance quilts, fundraiser quilts for wars, quilts of valor, Sept. 11 quilts — the future history of what’s happening.”

Among all the New Hampshire quilts she’s seen, Crossland does have a favorite type: “It’s the typical New Hampshire quilt women made to be used in the household, a wool pieced quilt. Women put their patches together in an artistic fashion, whether they knew it or not at the time.”

Quilting enjoyed a bit of limelight during the first few decades of the 20th century when “the Arts and Crafts movement also exerted its influence, stressing as it did the use of natural, unadorned materials, good workmanship and simple designs,” as Roderick Kiracofe writes in his history of quilting, *The American Quilt*. Quilters became artists, an identity that was reinforced and celebrated by quilt shows and exhibits in institutions around the country.



(Above) Suzanne Leblanc of Autumn Harvest Farm and Quilt Studio in Grafton stitches together three layers with a pattern of mother and baby elephants (detail left) with her longarm quilting machine.

Quilting fell in popularity after World War II as a realignment of gender roles took place and modern technology began to render many household labors obsolete. However, women in rural areas — like so much of New Hampshire — still lived lives fairly similar to those of their mothers and grandmothers, and they maintained the practice of quilting for future generations to discover.

Now quilting has found its place among the array of artistic endeavors of the modern day. Joy Worcester, president of the New Hampshire State Quilters Association, estimates that there are about 30 guilds in the state. “Guilds come in many shapes and sizes — just like our quilts,” she says.

Personal history

Quilts mark not only public history but personal history as well.

LeBlanc flips through a stack of quilt squares, as well as dozens and dozens of multicolored appliquéd flow-ers. “We found a box full of squares done by my grandmother, so my

mother and I are making one quilt for each child. It’ll take a while, but we’ll get it done,” she says. She remembers watching her mother, grandmother and great grandmother sew quilts with their own friends and neighbors. They were her first teachers.

After a canning jar exploded in her right hand and severed the nerves to her fingers, LeBlanc found quilting nearly impossible until she discovered the longarm quilting machine. “I was working at Sunshine Carousel Quilt Shop and Elaine Pillsbury, the owner, was looking for someone to run the machine. I thought, well, I could do that,” LeBlanc says.

Now LeBlanc has her own machine. Most winter days, she can be found sitting behind it, maneuvering the arm in intricate patterns across material stretched tightly on a quilt frame. During the summer, she still manages to quilt one or two a month between hours in the garden.

Gwen Gensler, president of the Sunshine Quilters Guild, knows all

about inheriting half finished quilting projects. “My mother started making a list of all of her current projects and

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QUILTING AND CARING IN CONCORD

BY *Sally L. Wright*

Like busy worker bees, the folks at Peggy Anne’s Quilting & Sewing shop are hard at work in their subterranean location just below Main Street in Concord. They are putting together quilting kits that can make anyone look like a longtime quilter.

Pulling fabric from vertical stacks of purples, oranges and pinks, and horizontal stacks of florals, prints and batiks, Peggy Anne’s packages a kit that is affordable and fun. Kits are sold to quilters all over the world through their web site, and the biggest seller is the 40-by-52 inch lap quilt kit priced at \$29. According to employee Jessica Aguilar, the kits can be combined to make bigger quilts.

Other kits include vintage bags, baby quilts and runners. Owner Peggy Anne Klinker is very selective about the fabrics, opting for only fair trade batiks and imported cotton



fabric. “We’re careful to select batiks not only for their beauty, but for the trade practices of the companies involved,” she says. “This means with every batik purchased at Peggy Anne’s, you know a fabric artist living somewhere else on this planet has clean water, a fair wage, and child labor is not involved. If we don’t care, who will?”

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THREADS THROUGH TIME continued from page 9 stopped after three-and-a-half single spaced pages!" she tells the Sunshine Quilters with a look of mock horror on her face.

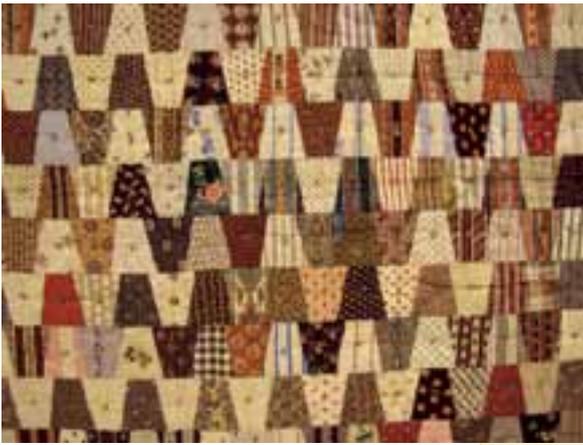
Later Gensler holds up a quilt with a Dresden Plate pattern and explains, "My grandmother made these blocks and gave them to my mom. She finished it and gave it to me since I had the idea of using a black border. It's one of those if-the-house-was-burning-down-what-would-you-save things."

Friends like these

Quilts have been used by women to mark special events for centuries. When someone is born, when someone gets married, when someone dies, someone makes a quilt. Mourning quilts are particularly potent gestures; traditionally, mourning quilts were made from pieces of the dead person's clothing and were sometimes used as shrouds.

"My husband asked me, 'Do you know the kinds of friends you have, to make you a quilt like this?'" Cheryl Bentley of Salisbury holds up her Katie Memorial Quilt, a glorious explosion of pink. The members of Sunshine Quilters made the quilt for Cheryl in memory of her 5-year-old daughter who died in October 2007 from complications of the flu. "They were like a huge family. I could go to the meeting — of course they all gave me big hugs — and then we'd sit down and quilt. It meant so much to be there."

Sunshine Quilters has donated quilts to fundraisers for the Grantham Village School, Orion House in Newport, and Women's Supportive Services of Sullivan County. One December the group members designed their own quilted stockings and presented them, filled with goodies, to David's House, CHaD, Visiting Nurse Association & Hospice of Vermont and New Hampshire, and the VA Medical Center in White River Junction, Vt. They also used to make "cruiser quilts," small lap quilts for the Grantham police to carry in the trunk of their squad cars to give to children who'd been involved in car accidents.



An 1890s tied tumber block quilt

“Quilters seem to be a pretty charitable people,” says Linda Martin. Martin first started quilting in 1993 when she wanted to make something different as a gift for her mother. “I got hooked and my mom was very happy with her quilt; she carted it around the neighborhood as much as she kept it on her bed!”

A few days after Bentley brought her Katie quilt home to place on her bed, her 2-year-old daughter, Molly, took a pair of scissors and made a small cut on the border.

“I was so upset,” recalls Bentley, “but I finally realized it’s a fabric-life thing. Quilts are made up of pieces of your life and you have to repair it as you go. Just because it might be a little damaged, it doesn’t lose its ability to give warmth and strength.” On her lap sleeps her 8-month-old, Kelly, who is, of course, wrapped in a quilt. **K**

Andi Diehn lives and writes in Enfield. She does not quilt (yet), but her mother does, and her three young sons cuddle every night under pirate quilts made by their Grammy.

As a child, photographer Jon Gilbert Fox had the pleasure of his great grandmother Fox’s company only twice, but she left a legacy that keeps him warm and her in his thoughts. Blind since she was about 10 years old, Ms. Fox still managed to piece, sew and stitch quite a few quilts — two of which blanket her great grandson’s beds.

ON THE ROAD

Quilting might seem like a cozy, indoor sort of thing to do, but sometimes quilters like to take their art for a drive.

“A quilt shop hop is when you sign up for a passport and go to different shops to get the passport stamped,” explains Elaine Pillsbury, owner of the Sunshine Carousel Quilt Shop in Grantham. “It gets people to visit different shops they may not have been to before, and the more shops you go to the more chance you have of winning a big prize.”

Irene Haley, owner of The Quilting Corner in Tilton, participates in three shop hops during the year in March, July and October. “Quilters love to visit quilt shops,” she says. “Each one is different. People might be loyal to their local quilt shop, but they certainly love finding new ones.”

Anyone can sign up for a shop hop. There’s usually a small fee for the passport — \$7 or \$8 — and there’s also usually a small gift like a cutting mat or a bag just for signing up. Discounts, sales, and edible goodies greet “hoppers” at each store on their

list. During the New Hampshire Quilters Harvest Hop over the first weekend in October, participants who manage to visit every shop on the list, including The Constant Quilter in Andover and Pine Tree Quilt Shop in Salem, are entered into a grand prize drawing which might be a sewing machine or even a quilt.

The shops get exposure to people who may not have visited otherwise and who will likely come back and bring a friend. “All we need is a small introduction,” says Haley.

Quilters are generally a friendly bunch, and quilt shop owners follow suit. “All the shops seem to work together,” says Haley, who has owned her shop for a couple of years. “We’re likely to recommend each other to customers. It’s not really competitive.”

One easy way to find out about local shop hops is to search on the Web for “quilt shop hop New Hampshire.” Also, keep an eye on message boards at your favorite quilt stores for upcoming hops.

— Andi Diehn

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