

# Who We Are

## Patchwork Quilting in Southern Appalachia

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*“Quilts are the cleanest, simplest, and the most authentic expression of who I think we are as a people”*

—Ken Burns<sup>1</sup>

Sewing is not an exclusively American tradition, as people have been covering themselves with cloth and skins for many thousands of years. Each culture has developed its unique traditions when it comes to cloth.<sup>2</sup> With this understanding in mind, as people migrated to different parts of the world, they brought their cultural and artistic traditions with them. The European traditions that came to Appalachia with the settlers quickly became as unique as the American experiment itself.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, the evolution of Appalachian quilt-making traditions proved pivotal in the development of the maker's personal identities.

The art of quilting was in part born out of necessity to use all available scraps of fabric. Each area in the United States—from the Amish people in the Northeast to the rural farmer's wife of Southern Appalachia—incorporated its own distinct styles of working with fiber.<sup>4</sup> Quilts served the utilitarian purpose of protection from cold temperatures in the winter, but they became

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<sup>1</sup> Kay Hall and Jay Turco, “Nebraska Stories: The Quilts of Ken Burns,” Nebraska Public Media, April 19, 2018, video, 10:45. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdlRU5B3YsM>.

<sup>2</sup> Kassia St. Clair, *The Golden Thread: How Fabric Changed History* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2021), 1–3.

<sup>3</sup> Rudy Abramson and Jean Haskell, *Encyclopedia of Appalachia* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006), 263.

<sup>4</sup> Anita Loscalzo, “A Tompson County, New York, Quilt Top Mystery,” *Uncoverings: The Research Papers of the American Quilt Study Group* 42, (2021): 83–117.

much more than that over time. Making quilts served multiple purposes: from the functional, to the creative, to bond-building. These fiber-works protected loved ones from suffering the extreme cold of winters, they gave women a chance to express their creativity in a time when there were not many creative avenues open to them, and they allowed them to connect and socialize with other women as it was commonplace for them to gather together and quilt the final piece as a group effort.<sup>5</sup> Quiltmaking was an important thread that fostered communal bonding.

Scholars often ask from where did the primary motivation to make quilts and other artistic works from fiber stem. Was it tradition, culture, or simply an economic necessity that drove early 20th century Southern Appalachian women to create? The answer inevitably varies from person to person and community to community. Probably the simplest and safest answer is “all of the above.” However, and whenever possible, women have been creators from the beginning of human history, but traditionally, they have had fewer opportunities than their male counterparts for creative expression available for them. In Southern Appalachia, quilting became not only an acceptable method of creating but also a respected one.

Older women in this region, both before and during WWII, learned to quilt at an early age, and many of them have continued to quilt for most of their lives.<sup>6</sup> Historically, quilting production fell into a slump after WWII, but the craft had a revival starting in the 1970s. Since then it has steadily continued to gain in popularity without any signs of slowing down. At present, quilting is big business with millions of people quilting all over the country. Still practiced by mostly women, quilters gather to show off their quilts, share stories of the past, and sometimes to collaborate on a community quilt. One cannot help but believe that many of today’s quilters feel a strong link to the shared past of their quiltmaking foremothers.

### **Southern Appalachia**

Appalachia is a large area of the Eastern United States stretching from New York to Alabama. The area is rich in culture and

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Dunne, “NBMAA Exhibit Shows Quilting as an Artistic Expression for Women,” *Harford Courant*, October 23, 2014, <https://www.courant.com/ctnow/arts-theater/hc-nbmaa-quilts-1024-20141024-story.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Ruth Wall, in discussion with the author, McMinn County, TN, May 2021.

resources, but like the southern accent, Appalachian culture varies greatly from region to region. Southern Appalachia has historically been a poor region, with poverty being widely associated with the area. Logging has been an important source of wealth for some landowners, but with humble financial beginnings and few employment opportunities, many in Southern Appalachia have had to struggle to survive. The wages provided in many of these areas barely meet the financial needs of families. This has caused many rural people to leave their family land in search of better pay in the cities. The mass exodus of people searching to find dependable work and good pay resulted in the decimation of many small towns across today's Southern Appalachia.

Southern Appalachia has a unique history, both economically and culturally. It has been and continues to be cut off from most of the economic and cultural advances of the rest of the country. It has been said that Appalachia lives twenty years behind the rest of the country. However, in today's world, progress is more rapid. Thanks to widespread access to the internet and mass communications, the rural south no longer lags so far behind the rest of the country. The populations that once existed may have fled the many small towns, but poverty and lack of employment are fading. Industry is coming back to many areas, which will help to decrease the wage gap and give people in the area a living wage.

When people first came to Southern Appalachia, they came from Europe for a number of reasons, but ultimately it was so they could have a better life for themselves and their children. In Eastern Tennessee and Western North Carolina, most of the immigrants were from Scotland, Ireland, and Germany.<sup>7</sup> These immigrants found lush lands in a temperate rainforest that was teeming with opportunity. Small towns sprang up around the region, with larger towns being centered around rivers and railroads. The culture in the small towns became an accumulation of traditions, languages, and cultures from the old world. People began to coalesce a new way of living, speaking, worshiping, and creating, forged from the traditions they had brought with them. Over time, the divergent customs of the early settlers came together to create a uniquely Southern Appalachian lifestyle.

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<sup>7</sup> Abramson and Haskell, 258, 275.

If America can be described as the “people of plenty”, then, according to Historian David Potter,<sup>8</sup> the rural south may be described as the “people of poverty.” Some historians insist that plantation owners received the best land with non-slave owners “shunned aside.” Others argue that non-slave holders didn’t significantly tribute to the economy. With only their physical labor to offer, slaveholders had no reason to employ paid white workers, which contributed to the level of poverty often found in the Southern Appalachian area.

After the American Civil War, the defeated South was once again struggling for survival. With an estimated 258,000 southern men dead, families were even more desperate than they already had been before. Subsistence farming, along with working other people's land was—in many cases—the only method of survival.

The depression hit the South especially hard because so many were struggling even before 1929. However, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “New Deal” created programs that greatly improved life for many people in the region. The Tennessee Valley Authority, for example, created many new, well-paying jobs and helped build critical infrastructure in the region. Along with the implementation of Social Security, the Works Progress Administration, and the new Civilian Conservation Corps, these programs radically changed the “New South.” Although maybe not single-handedly bringing the entire population out of poverty, they stood at the frontier of better lives, for residents both white and black.<sup>9</sup>

### **Culture of Southern Appalachia**

Because Southern Appalachia was cut off from the rest of the country until fairly recently, many of the stereotypes portrayed the Southerner as backwards, uneducated, and ignorant. Many of these stereotypes came from popular books, magazines, and television. *The Beverly Hillbillies* television show is one example, but as the stereotypes persisted, the reality is that the Southern people continued to have a rich cultural heritage with strong beliefs in God, family, and country. The pride of the Southerner goes beyond the image of a “redneck” and portends a strongly devoted people who strive to protect the things that they hold dear. The South may still

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, “Poverty,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 4*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 237.

<sup>9</sup> Wilson, 237–244.



be catching up to the rest of the country, as many struggle to come to terms with compromising what they see as a tradition with what people from other parts of the United States see as progress. Change in traditional thinking has always been hard for the people of the South, from the loss in the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement. However, these beliefs do not represent all of the Southern people; many in the South are on board with positive change. Forward-thinking people realize that with progress comes opportunity—opportunities for gainful employment, better educational systems, and a higher standard of living.<sup>10</sup>

### What Is a Quilt?

The term *quilt* or *quilting* can be used in a number of different ways. Quilting can refer to the piecing of different fabrics together by hand or by using a sewing machine. It can refer to the act of sewing the layers of fabric together with a batting of cotton or wool in the middle. An Appalachian quilt is traditionally made of three parts that create something of a fabric “sandwich”: the front of the quilt is referred to as the top, next comes a layer of wool or cotton batting, and then finally a backing fabric. These three layers are then quilted together by stitching the thin thread through all three layers and then tying it off. This process makes all three layers become one *whole* quilt. As far as materials go, nothing much is needed except for fabric, batting, scissors, needle, and thread. These few tools made it not only possible and affordable but also necessary for even the poorest families to take part in. There still exists an ingrained image of a poor woman quilting with tiny scraps to make functional works to keep her family warm in the winter, but the fact is, even affluent women were known to practice this art form. When quiltmaking fell out of favor during the mid-twentieth century, it was both lower-middle-class and the upper-middle-class that brought it back into fashion during the 1970s, and it is still going strong today.

### Quilting in Southern Appalachia

Quilting did not originate in Southern Appalachia, nor did it have its beginnings in the United States.<sup>11</sup> What is unique to the Southern Appalachian region is how these isolated women took what they had and made such profoundly beautiful and inspired

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<sup>10</sup> Abramson and Haskell, 1596.

<sup>11</sup> St. Clair, 159–171.

works of art that also embody the very culture from which they came. These quiltmakers, for the most part, had very limited resources, and many of the poorest were cut off from outside influences. One significant exception to this reality is what is known as common quilt patterns. A *pattern* could be reproduced, shared, and even manipulated to make it unique to any particular region. Many patterns, such as the Baltimore Album quilts, reference a specific place, but for the most part patterns were not unique to an individual area. Women shared patterns and were inspired by the patterns that their neighbors used. “Quilt patterns were like ballads, they moved constantly from community to community over surprisingly great distances.”<sup>12</sup> Patterns could be shared, ordered in the mail, or acquired in newspapers and magazines. For accomplished quiltmakers, these patterns could even be tweaked and subtly changed to create a new pattern. From the design of the quilt to the fabric choices, quilts could be as unique as the quiltmakers themselves.

“Making art” or expressing oneself creatively would have been considered a novelty or an extravagance that many women of the region would not have even attempted; survival was at the forefront of their minds, and artistic expression was a luxury that they could not have afforded. But although very little time, if any, was allocated to pursue creative pursuits (there was raising the kids, keeping up the home, and helping out on the farm), many women still found time to express themselves through the making of quilts. As an added benefit, quilting helped to stave off boredom after all the household chores were done while fulfilling the natural creative urge to express oneself. Quilting was ideal as an activity during rainy days, in the evenings, and in the winters with no crops to store. Quilting allowed the women to get together to socialize, and as they put it, to “put up” or stitch together a quilt.

The image of a quilting bee is a quaint and charming one, but for the women of Southern Appalachia, during most of the twentieth century, sitting around a large quilting frame on one centralized quilt while socializing with each other as their children played nearby was as essential to local group identity as one’s participation in the local religious worship rituals. In much of poor

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<sup>12</sup> Eliot Wigginton and Susan Cooper, *The Foxfire Book 1: Hog Dressing, Log Cabin Building, Mountain Crafts and Foods, Planting by the Signs, Snake Lore, Hunting Tales, Faith Healing, Moonshining, and Other Affairs of Plain Living* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 142.

Southern Appalachian culture, women were not encouraged to socialize. Getting together with friends to visit was seen as being negligent to the duties of the home. However, the quilting bee gave an excuse to get together, have a good lunch, and quilt a top in an afternoon. These bees kept the communities close and allowed the women much-needed time with each other. Quilting was a lifeline, it was a way for women to provide warmth (love) for their families, a way to express their deeper creative natures, and a way to connect and bond with fellow neighbors, family, and friends.<sup>13</sup>

### **My Journey**

Many of my earliest memories involve quilting. I grew up as an only child in the middle of a very large extended family. Home time was very quiet, but visiting my grandmother's house and that of her sisters always involved a lot of talking about and looking at quilts. During my earlier years, each of the women had closets full of quilts that would be pulled out, discussed, and appreciated in turn. As story after story was conveyed, the quilts would be carefully folded and replaced in the closet or cedar chest. At the time, I had little interest. Bored as I was at the time, looking back, these visits were the most pivotal moments of my upbringing.

My mother, Marie (born in 1947), learned how to quilt from her mother. She grew up in extreme poverty in the foothills of Southern Appalachia in Franklin County, Alabama. Her father, Grady (born in 1917), picked cotton for a living. Her mother, Mamie Lou (born in 1924) grew a large garden to feed the family while managing a household of nine. Having seven children to clothe, feed, and keep safe was more than a full-time job. Still, she managed to make the time to quilt primarily for functional purposes. With scraps that neighbors gave her, and remnants of feedsacks, her quilts were made with the purpose of helping her large family to survive. Without quilts, her children and even herself and her husband, may not have made it through the winter months. For my grandmother, making quilts was an expression of her love.

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<sup>13</sup> Abramson and Haskell, 167.



Figure 1. Mamie Lou's quilt (c.1940s). See the online article for a full-color image.

My grandmother was the oldest girl in a family of eleven. Her mother died in childbirth when my grandmother was eight years old and she was tasked, at such an early age, to care for and raise the new baby girl, prepare the meals for the family, and also to work in the fields. She acquired most of her quilting knowledge from her own mother, and then her eventual stepmother, while she, in turn, taught her younger sister and eventually her own children the craft of quilting. Although it is certain that life was profoundly difficult for her, she persevered. She even refused to quit school, and she eventually graduated from high school. She was an incredibly strong and stoic woman who saw a lot of change happen in the South during her ninety-three-year lifetime. Even when her husband was finally able to leave the fields and move into a factory job, she continued to live frugally and continued her miserly lifestyle for the rest of her days. Conserving her money, resources, and even her affection toward her children and grandchildren was ingrained in her DNA. There was never even a hint of deviation from this norm.

Her quilts (see Figs. 1 and 2) may have been made primarily to be used to keep young bodies warm, but they were still the only avenue she allowed herself to express her creativity. The cloth came as donations from neighbors or as cast-offs from a local sewing factory. The batting was prepared from raw cotton gathered from local farms. Her scissors, thimble, and needles were treasured possessions.



Figure 2. Mamie Lou's quilt (c.1940s). See the online article for a full-color image.

My mother was the oldest of seven children who all lived into adulthood with the efforts of my long-suffering grandparents. Marie, my mother, learned how to quilt from her mother, just as her mother had learned to quilt from hers, and quilting was passed down as far back as our family records go. Quilting served as an uplifting and comforting activity in a life that was rarely exciting or certain. Picking cotton, helping in the garden, and raising younger siblings were the ingredients that made up my mother's childhood. When my mother was nineteen, she left the farm in search of work, which she found as a switchboard operator for Bellsouth in the small town of Decatur, Alabama. In Decatur, she continued to work, make quilts, and raise me, her only child, until her passing at age fifty-eight.

My mother was an extremely shy and quiet woman. She had few friends and chose to spend much of her spare time quilting. I was born when she was in her thirties, and she spent her free time prior to when I was born expressing herself through the making of quilts (see Fig. 3).

I can count on one finger the number of vacations my family took as I was growing up. However, there was one exception—an annual pilgrimage to the American Quilter's Society International Show in Paducah, Kentucky. Each April, around 40,000 people, mostly older white women, converged on a town roughly the same size as a couple of cornfields, to see hundreds of handmade,

machine-made, and experimental quilts. This experience allowed me to see quilting as a much larger presence in society than something that simply ran in my family; years later, I would have the revelation that the matriarchal quiltmakers in my family were a part of the larger tradition of this important art form. Although many women may have stopped making quilts after World War II due to them being seen as “old-timey” and not relevant, the craft experienced a revival in the 1970s that put it back into the mainstream crafting scene.



Figure 3. Marie's Cathedral Window Quilt (c.1980's).  
See the online article for a full-color image.

Growing up, I did not automatically appreciate quiltmaking despite being exposed to it so often. Being a hyperactive child, I could not envision myself sitting still long enough to finish a piece. It was not until I was nineteen years old that I made my first quilt. I had a boyfriend, and I wanted to make it just for him. I had found my motivation, and with that my love of quilting exploded in a whirlwind of creative energy. I do not need to make my quilts for survival, but sleeping under a handmade quilt feels great. Making quilts also gives me a connection to my mother, grandmother, and great aunts.

After that first quilt, I made a few dozen more quite quickly from patterns I found in books and magazines. The invention of the rotary cutter and modern piecing techniques has made the entire process much faster than it was in my grandmother's day. I sped through each one, making my quilts at a rapid-fire rate. I continued with this until I no longer found making them interesting. It was then that I set out to design my own original pattern. I found some graph paper, and I sketched out my quilt. I had no idea what I was doing, but this quilt is still one of my favorites because it represents my leap beyond the limitations of





Figure 4. Quilt for Marie, by Mandy Wilson (2005–2006).  
See the online article for a full-color image.

commercial patterns into a larger world of personal creative expression through quilting.

After I earned my undergraduate degree, I began work as an art teacher in the public school system, and I never really thought too much about going to graduate school. I was interested in designing and producing quilts and most MFA programs were not suited for me. Fifteen years

after my graduation from undergraduate college, I found a program that could work for me. An MA in Art (as opposed to the more specialized MFA degree) allowed me to experience many types of art-making, including crafts and quilting. I breezed through the program until the time came for me to answer the question “Why do I make art?” For my thesis project, I was to prepare a body of work and also write a paper answering this question. I had never reflected deeper than “I made art because it is fun,” but this was graduate school and that answer simply wouldn’t satisfy either my professors or myself. I spent a lot of time reflecting on the art that I had made in the past, the art I enjoyed making then, and the art that I could foresee myself making in the future. One thing that came up consistently was that the quilts that I was making were directly linked to my experiences as a child.

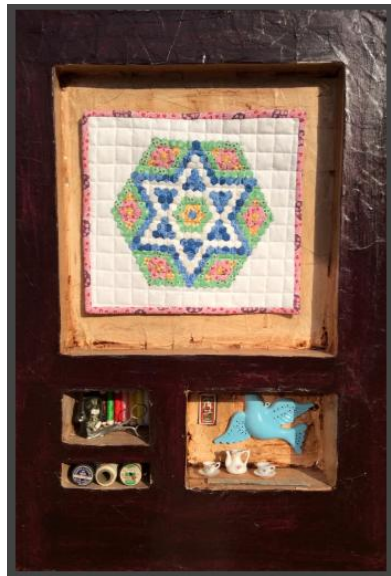
Seventeen years ago, as my mother lay dying in the hospital, I began my second personally designed quilt. I had never hand sewn a quilt before, but I was determined to make one in this manner. My design was to be a huge, hand-pieced, one-inch hexagonal star quilt. I know that she never thought I would finish it, but I was confident; after she passed away, completing this quilting project provided me with comfort and it proved to be a mourning quilt. I thought about her with every stitch and cried throughout

much of making it. I worked on it incessantly and finished it in under a year. Then, I immediately put it in a drawer with the memory of her sewn into every hexagon-shaped piece of fabric. A few years later my husband suggested that I enter it in a quilt show as a way to honor her memory. I was hesitant, but I went ahead and entered it in the annual AQS show in Paducah that she had taken me to so many times before. When I received my acceptance letter I was happy, but all of the memories attached to the quilt moved me to tears again. My flower garden quilt hung in Kentucky in April of 2013 and still stands as my biggest, most complicated, and most challenging work (see Fig. 4). I don't think that my mother ever would have had the confidence to enter her quilts into the AQS show, but I know that she would be proud of me for displaying mine.

In graduate school, years later, I began considering my deeper motives for why I needed to create. I eventually began to understand how profoundly deep and important that my exposure to quilting as a child was for me. By sharing her love of quilting with me, my mother had given me a way to stay connected with the memories of her and to express this deeper creative impulse for the rest of my life. I am humbled and grateful for what she has given me.

In my graduate thesis paper, I wrote about the women who taught me and inspired me as I grew up. I spoke about my mother, grandmother, great aunts, and cousin, who all played a pivotal role in shaping my love and appreciation for quilting that I have today. I needed to have a body of work to accompany this paper so I decided to make a small wall icon box dedicated to each of these women. For this project, I made wooden boxes, covered them with papier mache, made miniature quilts to go in each one, and

Figure 5. Box for Marie, by Mandy Wilson (2020).  
See the online article for a full-color image.





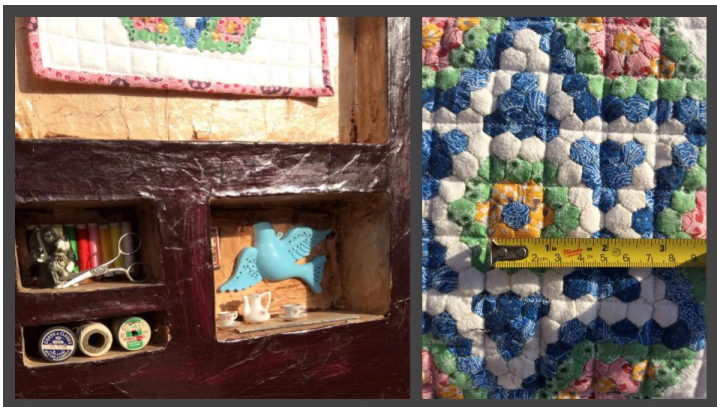
then filled the remaining space with items that belonged to the women or reminded me of them. In my mother's box (see Figs. 5 and 6), I made a small quilt using quarter-inch hexagons from the original 1930s and 1940s feed sack fabric that she had collected. I chose the pattern of a grandmother's flower garden because it was the same block that I made in my mourning quilt. It was the last pattern she ever saw me working on. The objects in it are highly personal and hopefully create an artwork that represents how I feel about her. In total, I made six boxes, including one for myself. Since completing them, I have shown these pieces in a solo show at the Creative Arts Guild in Dalton, Georgia, and I plan to show them again in a solo exhibition at the Athens Art Center in Athens, Tennessee, in March of 2022.

I have had my quilts displayed in the American Quilter's Society Show twice now, and have exhibited in numerous shows around Eastern Tennessee. I never plan to stop making quilts, and as an only child who now has no immediate relatives, it's about the only thing I have left to help me feel connected to my past.

Although I have never been part of a traditional quilting bee or needed to quilt for survival, I believe that I have discovered the foundations of *why* I quilt, and why many others likely do as well. Quilting provides a vital connection to family, tradition, and community that links together many women in Southern Appalachia.

I have recently begun to collect stories from other women on why they make quilts and I have found many different reasons, but

Figure 6. Box for Marie detail, by Mandy Wilson (2020).  
See the online article for a full-color image.



the women I interview almost always bring up their mothers or grandmothers. They tell me of poor families, gardening for food, and how quilting brought women together. Two such interviews, one with a lifelong quiltmaker and one with a scholar and maker, are particularly relevant. Both women show the connectivity of the material, process, and final product why quilting still drives women to create.

Mrs. Ruth Wall<sup>14</sup> is a lively centenarian woman from McMinn County, Tennessee. She is a lovely woman who I met through a friend. She was kind enough to invite me into her home for this interview, in May 2021, and also to allow me to view and photograph her quilts. Mrs. Wall currently still lives independently and is now approaching 103 years old. She was taught to quilt by her mother, and she began making her first quilt in 1924 when she was five years old.

Although frail in body, I was surprised at the sharpness of Mrs. Wall; her ability to remember past details was remarkable. I began by just asking about her quilting. She told me of her love of her church and that she has many friends there who learned to quilt growing up.

“When we were growing up we made all of our dresses. Then momma would save every little scrap to put in a quilt. When momma would get the scraps up that she wanted to use, she would give me the rest and I remember she would cut patterns out of the newspaper and she would give me a needle and thread and I’d sew those little strips on those papers and then I’d cut them out and I’d have a quilt piece.”

She continued; “I [grew] up very poor, but we didn't know we was poor. We had plenty to suit us. We might have been poor but we was happy. Scraps were used to make quilts and momma taught me.” The community was also an important part of daily life. “Communities were closer then, not like nowadays. And when we was making a quilt, all of the neighbors would come to help. They would stay all day, some would bring a dish, but you know we would just sit and talk and sew our quilt. When one of us would be putting up a quilt to be quilted, we all went in and helped quilt it.” Most of Mrs. Wall’s quilts are “community quilted,” and in them you can see the unique approach brought by each woman.

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<sup>14</sup> Ruth Wall.



Figure 7. Dutch Dolls Quilt, by Ruth Wall (c.1940–1945).  
See the online article for a full-color image.

As mentioned, she first began piecing quilts at only five years old; Mrs. Wall recounts how big her stitches were in those early days and how “momma would teach [her] how to press the little pieces onto the paper and sew.”

Mrs. Wall’s first major quilt was created to celebrate her wedding day. Begun years before the actual wedding day event, her Dutch Doll quilt (see Fig. 7) was hand-pieced and hand-quilted. She began making her future wedding quilt when she was just ten years old. Stories say that when a young girl quilts on her wedding quilt then she will dream of the man she will marry. Mrs. Wall wasn’t so sure about that, but she did remain sleeping under that same quilt for the duration of her 73 years of marriage. She even continues to sleep under it to this day. Although in need of repair, this quilt has represented her love for her husband for all these years. She says, “I love my old quit, it just feels so good and it feels just like I wanted it too.”

When being taught to quilt, Mrs. Wall says, “momma wouldn’t let me use a machine until I was in my teens. And you know when you tell a kid that they can’t do anything then it makes them want to do it more.”

Mrs. Wall says that applique is her favorite method of piecing quilts. She has made many quilts over the years as gifts for her friends, children, and grandchildren. Many of these quilts were the same Dutch Doll pattern that she started with all those years ago,

only with variations. It is clear from speaking with her that piecing and quilting have given her much reward throughout her life. She continued to piece up into her nineties. Today she enjoys reminiscing about her quilts and showing them off to anyone who is interested. She is a kind, sweet woman and was generous in sharing her quilts and her story.

Mrs. Betts Ramsey was also gracious enough to sit for an interview with me in May 2021 in her home in Nashville, Tennessee.<sup>15</sup> She is currently 95 years old and remains productive as an artist and quilter daily. She has authored four books on quilting history and is a founding member of the American Quilt Study Group. Her ninety-plus years of life (at the time of the interview) have been filled with numerous art activities, but none has held her interest like quilting. She first became interested in quilts as a graduate student. Her active career in the quilting community has spanned more than seventy years, and she continues to be a contributor to local organizations through her beautiful works.

Mrs. Ramsey shared with me her motivations to make art as well as why she believes that women are drawn to the art form. “I’m attracted to the fabric,” she said, “women like to touch things and I also think that that is a contributing factor.” Women are

Figure 8. Bets Ramsey With One Of Her Resent Quilts (May 2021).  
See the online article for a full-color image.



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<sup>15</sup> Bets Ramsey, in discussion with the author, McMinn County, TN, May 2021.

conscious of their surroundings, “in their daily routines, from the household chores of cooking to folding laundry and sometimes creating “household goods.” Women are motivated to “glorify” and decorate their homes with fabric and things that can be touched. Touch is very important to women, and the quilts often have a pleasing tactile quality about them. “The quilt is just another accessory of that. You want to be comfortable in your bed but also to enjoy the beauty and fascination of designs.” Betts continues: “There is also a great satisfaction in finishing a quilt, it’s a great feeling of accomplishment, and you are honoring yourself by completing this project and enjoying it and giving it to someone you love or using it in your household.”

When asked about the future of quilting, Mrs. Ramey laughed and told me that she can’t imagine where quilting is going with all the technology available. “I don’t have any objection to doing your work on a modern machine, but I don’t do it myself.” Mrs. Ramsey pieces her tops on a standard older-model sewing machine and then hand-quilts all her work. “I like the rhythm of the quilting. It’s very peaceful, it’s very restful, and I would miss that if I used a sewing machine for it all.” She admits that there are “wonderful and amazing” quilts being made with today’s technology and computerized quilt pattern design programs, but she says that it’s not for her. “I thoroughly admire what the young people are doing today, but what are we ever going to do with all of these quilts?” She also spoke of how amazing it has been to see how far the quilting community has come. “Crafts have been known to go in cycles,” and yet quilting continues to endure.

Mrs. Ramsey believes that there are commonalities between all of the people who make quilts. “If you go to the American Quilt Study Group as a stranger, then you won’t be a stranger long.” Quilters are willing to exchange techniques and patterns to make for a welcoming atmosphere for newcomers to be a part of. “It’s not so much true of so many other forms of art and life. The source of friendship that you make (in quilting groups) is returned to you one hundredfold because of your connection to other people” (see Fig. 8).

It has become clear after talking to these women and after joining my local quilt guild that there is something special about the art of quilting. It bonds us together like few other crafts can and provides us with connections to our memories that will never fade.

## **Conclusion**

Examples of Southern Appalachian quilts can be found in private homes and antique stores all across the South. Unfortunately many have no identifying marks of the specific creator. Many quilts were simply not signed or marked with a date. Researchers can date the fabrics, but the specific makers are often lost to time. Quilts were, and still are, made by people for people, to be given away, sold, displayed, or used by family and friends. Quilting continues to link generations of women together in community and in family.

During my personal research, I have found that the idea of community is very important to everyone I have spoken to with regard to quilts—not only among the myriad communities of quilters that are out there but also the community of families sharing their knowledge from generation to generation. I have never met a selfish quilter; they have always been willing to share their works and their “secrets.” We learn from each other, and I believe that is one of the abiding characteristics of quilting. We learn from the past and need (and want) to pass this information on to future generations. There are no secrets in quilting that cannot be shared with others.

Quilting also links us to our personal past. In my work, I have a recurring theme of hexagon patterns just as Mrs. Wall has her recurring Dutch Doll pattern. There is something about a first major creative project and the memories associated with it that makes creators want to revisit those themes time after time. That and the fact that these patterns were taught to us by our mothers creates a lasting connection to people long passed. It is my hope that future generations continue this tradition and also find in quilting a link to the past.