

How I Researched the Mary Gasperik Quilt Collection: An Introduction to Susan Salser's Chronological List of Selected Quilt Columns Published by The Detroit News.

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When my grandmother Mary Gasperik died in Chicago in 1969 she left behind a large collection of over 80 beautiful quilts which she had made. I inherited a small number of these surviving quilts, but knew almost nothing of their history, or, indeed of the history of the quilting world in America during the period when my grandmother actively quilted. Very few of my grandmother's quilting patterns, quilt resources or correspondence survived the collapse of her health and her home. Among the few papers that did survive, however, were ten photographs, taken by the Chicago Parks District, in the 1930s, showing quilts on display in the field house at Tuley Park (Gasperik's local public park) and members of the Tuley Park Quilting Club, of which Gasperik was a member. She had saved several Chicago newspaper clippings about her quilt awards at the Illinois State Fair, along with a number of State Fair entry blanks, premium receipts and fan letters from admirers who saw her quilts at various Illinois State Fairs. The earliest of these is dated 1940, the rest run from 1946 through 1966. No Illinois State Fairs were held from 1941 through 1945, because of the war. There were also, in this small collection of Gasperik's personal 'quilt papers', two mysterious clippings from The Detroit News, dated October 7, 1938 and May 25, 1940, which indicated that Mary Gasperik sent quilts to something called The Detroit News Quilt Contest and Show.

The bulk of surviving 'hard evidence' of Gasperik's participation in quilt competitions pointed to Springfield, Illinois. My own personal recollection was that she participated in Illinois State Fairs; I never heard mention of Detroit. Thus my first endeavor as researcher of the Gasperik quilts was to request and read microfilm of The Springfield (Illinois) Register. I expected to find more information about her as a quilt-maker and about her quilts than what I saw in the few clippings in our archive. But I did **not** find more information in this source. What I have been able to figure out, in an effort to gauge Gasperik's quilt presence in Springfield, is gleaned from studying our surviving ribbons, entry receipts, small clippings, and a collection of what appear to be exhibit tags used in Tuley Park quilt shows. These handwritten yellow paper tags sometimes recorded information about where and when a particular quilt had won a particular ribbon. My examination led me to conclude that although we have 13 actual physical prize-ribbons, in fact, by the time of her 50th wedding anniversary, she had won far more ribbons. An anniversary announcement published November 29, 1956 states: "Mrs. Gasperik is a prize winning quiltmaker, having won with more than 35 of her quilts." But Gasperik continued to exhibit (and re-exhibit) her quilts at Illinois State Fairs after 1956, greatly increasing that estimated total of Illinois Fair ribbons awarded to Gasperik quilts. Extrapolating from known information (actual ribbons, published information about ribbons and Fair receipts) I concluded that the actual Gasperik quilt ribbon count was probably close to 70. It turned out that Chicago and Springfield newspapers did NOT yield more information than I already had about Mary Gasperik's persona as a quilter or about the quilts themselves.

It seemed to me that the next thing to try would be to consult microfilm of The Detroit News, looking for information that could shed light on the nature of her connection to Detroit. What were those two Detroit newspaper clippings all about? As far as I knew, my grandmother had come directly to Chicago (from Hungary and through Ellis Island as a

passenger on the Pretoria) as a young woman (age 16, as it turned out), and had remained in Chicago until she died in 1969 at age 81. She did not speak English well, and it seemed to me, as a child and adolescent, that she lived a rather isolated life. She did not share with me (or my sisters) information about her personal history. And she did not talk about quilts (in English, at least). During our visits she chatted in Hungarian with our mother. Our mother did not teach us Hungarian, although she had grown up in Chicago speaking Hungarian at home (until she started public school). I could see first-hand, however, that grandma loved to sew and lived to sew. She made much-appreciated applique children's quilts and clothing for us. A mysteriously volatile and unpredictable personality, from my child's point of view, she was demonstrably at her happiest, most self-assured and proudest when showing us her quilts. I never thought to ask her questions about the whys and hows of that stack of quilts; and I was not interested in learning about quilts at that point in my life. This photo, probably dating from 1945, shows me with my grandmother on the front steps of our home on Chicago's south side. We are both wearing dresses made and appliqued by her. She made many such dresses, a few of which survive.





Having been unable to learn more about Mary Gasperik the quilter, from Illinois newspapers, and remembering those two mysterious Detroit News clippings, I decided to request microfilm of The Detroit News, using Inter-Library Loan services, through the Santa Monica Public Library. I received and read my first Detroit News microfilm request on March 7, 2007. That first roll was dated November 1 through 15 of 1933. I was disappointed to find no mention of Mary Gasperik, but I happened to hit the jackpot in terms of Detroit quilt history. Those particular two weeks included the opening of the very first quilt show held by The Detroit News. It appeared to be a very large show; and it was all news to me. The newspaper's "Beauty in the Home" columns written by Edith B. Crumb, the interior decoration editor of The Detroit News, were a daily explosion of chatty news about quilting going on right there and then. I felt dropped into a new universe and couldn't wait to make my next microfilm request.

Over 8 years later I was STILL regularly requesting and reading Detroit News microfilm because it turned out to be such a rich resource of American quilt history, as well as an unexpected source of information about my own quilter grandmother. From reading The Detroit News I learned how my grandmother came to participate in The Detroit News Quilt Club Corner and its annual quilt shows and contests. She picked up a discarded copy of The Detroit News at a World Series baseball game in Chicago in October 1935, and read about an upcoming quilt contest to be held in Detroit. She had already been for several years engaged in making quilts as a result of the exhibit of quilts at the 1933-34 Chicago Worlds Fair. She learned at the Chicago Fair that her local public park, Tuley Park, sponsored a quilt club and she joined it. Thus, by the time of the 1935 Detroit News quilt show and contest she had already completed a number of quilts. Two of the Tuley Park quilt photographs in our Gasperik archive are dated May 15, 1935. Mary Gasperik was, in October 1935, clearly very eager to show her work to other quilters. She immediately

wrote to Edith Crumb at The Detroit News, joined the newspaper's Quilt Club Corner, and she sent quilts to be exhibited in that upcoming show (which turned out to be the third such Detroit News Quilt Contest and Show). Within weeks of that baseball game where she learned about Detroit's quilt club and show, she hopped on a bus and went to that show, bringing with her a quilt top she had just finished. (The Detroit News contests solicited and exhibited tops as well as completed quilts, something she might not have guessed when she picked up that newspaper at the ball game.) The director of that quilt show (by now called "quilt club editor" as well as "interior decorations editor" by The Detroit News, Edith B. Crumb, chatted with Gasperik at the show, and in a newspaper column published several months after the quilt show, described their meeting (and that quilt top) in detail. This included a photograph taken of that quilt top by The Detroit News. One of the wonderful things about The Detroit News quilt club and shows is that this major national newspaper was willing to devote resources to Edith Crumb's quilt project. This would have been a substantial investment over a nearly ten-year period. The lovely quilt column I describe above, however, did not make it into the Gasperik archive because my grandmother probably never even saw it. She did not subscribe to The Detroit News and she had probably hand-carried those two Detroit News clippings we have in our Gasperik archive on her bus trips home to Chicago from the 1938 and 1940 quilt shows. By the end of my Detroit News microfilm project, I had located and captured 13 different articles mentioning my grandmother and her quilts! I think it likely that grandma was unaware of her frequent appearances in The Detroit News.

Before I began reading Edith Crumb's columns in The Detroit News I had known nothing of my grandmother's contacts with Detroit News quilt editor Edith B. Crumb, nothing of her bus trips to quilt shows in Detroit, and nothing of her contacts with other Detroit News Quilt Club Corner members, who seemed to welcome her into their orbit in a way that her local Tuley Park Quilt Club, led by Virgie Stewart, did not. Detroit was never mentioned during the family visits to my grandmother's house that I can remember. This is not surprising, since I was born in June 1940 and the final Detroit News quilt show was held in May 1940. It is from reading old Detroit News quilt columns, and not from family memories or surviving family records, that I have been able to become better acquainted with my grandmother the quilter.

It is my hope that others dipping into The Quilt Index's Detroit Quilt History Project will have the same happy experience. Because The Detroit News's role in American quilt history of the 1930s and 1940s appeared to me to be largely unknown and under-researched, my task, which I initially understood to be determining the nature of my grandmother's connection with Detroit, turned into a nearly-decade-long examination of The Detroit News microfilm. I needed to find out how The Detroit News Quilt Club Corner and its 'annual' quilt contests and quilt shows came to be, how it functioned, and how it ended. My grandmother's participation was but a small part of that story. The larger story is captured in the more than 4,800 scans that I collected and shared with The Quilt Index in the hope that this rich research resource might be preserved and shared.

In the course of doing this research, examining this mountain of microfilm, I discovered that my grandmother was an enthusiastic, appreciated and active participant in The Detroit News Quilt Club Corner and its quilt shows. To my surprise I learned that the quilt shows sponsored by this newspaper went on for 8 years (not unlike my own research project!) and were unusually large, national shows. The newspaper reported exhibiting 2000 quilts to 50,000 visitors. Quilts, and club memberships, were submitted from every one of the

states. Ordinary and extraordinary quilts (and quilt tops) were exhibited there in great profusion. Quilt club correspondence was published. The quilt-related events and people described by Edith B. Crumb in her newspaper columns provide a complete immersion into a nearly decade-long period in American quilt history.

I had looked for, and found, my grandmother's initial quilt motivators in Chicago (especially in that city's 1933-34 Chicago Worlds Fair, called "The Century of Progress", a phrase Mary Gasperik embroidered onto her earliest quilts). But I had not anticipated what a great influence The Detroit News Quilt Club Corner and their enormous quilt shows had on her. I came to see how her participation in Detroit affected her quilting 'career', guided her choices of what quilts to make, how to design them, and when to make them. This was (and continues to be) very exciting to me. As I learned from reading the microfilm, the highest prize Mary Gasperik won in Detroit was the first prize cash award and ribbon she won (in the applique category) at the 1938 show. It was probably (newspaper columns do not specify the quilt) for her rendition of the Detroit News quilt pattern called Roses and Forget-Me-Nots. When the 5th (1938) quilt show was announced, The Detroit News was still giving cash prizes ONLY to quilts made from the newspaper's own patterns, a rule established at the inception of the quilt contests. That rule was later changed and by the time of what turned out to be the last Detroit quilt show and contest (its 6th contest, held in May 1940), cash prizes could be awarded to quilts not made from Detroit News patterns.

After Gasperik went home from this 6th quilt contest, she began work on what she probably regarded as her finest quilt, the one called Colonial Quilting Bee. The design of this quilt is a specific salute to the Quilt Club Corner and Detroit News quilt contests, employing the newspaper's iconography which always (and deliberately, as Edith wrote) accompanied stories about an upcoming quilt show and contest. Gasperik used patterns which she probably got from fellow Detroit News quilt club member Marjorie (Mrs. Arthur) Miller, who had made a similar quilt, one that was exhibited and much admired at the 1935 quilt contest, Gasperik's first visit to Detroit. By January 11, 1936, when Edith Crumb devoted an entire column to describing the quilt and its maker, Mrs. Miller had received 150 letters asking her about this quilt. Miller's quilt of quilters was regarded as a star of The Detroit News quilt shows and contests, making it a significant challenge opportunity. Miller's quilt of quilters was re-exhibited at the 1940 show and contest, where it, being a non-News-design, qualified for a prize cash ribbon. It was awarded a third prize in the applique category. Gasperik's Hungarian Girls quilt was awarded second prize in that category. Gasperik finished her interpretation of the Miller quilt, but never had a chance to show it off to her fellow Detroit quilt club members because a 7th contest was never held. The club and its contests ceased in the month after the bombing of Pearl Harbor when the attention of the entire country shifted to the war effort.

I believe that, through this Detroit News microfilm banquet, I have had the opportunity to experience what quilting represented to my grandmother. I could glimpse the quilts she saw at those large and well-attended exhibits, and I learned what quilts other quilters found noteworthy, what other quilters were making. I came to understand that she translated her Detroit experiences into ideas which she used her needle and thread to record onto some of the quilts now in the Gasperik collection. Ironically, only one ribbon from a Detroit News Quilt Show survived her. It is a green Honorable Mention ribbon dated 1937. Newspaper columns indicate that she won many more Detroit ribbons than that. From information in those 13 Detroit News columns which specifically mention Gasperik, I concluded that there is newspaper evidence that she exhibited a minimum of 20 quilts in

Detroit. Judging by a Chicago newspaper clipping stating that she came home from one Detroit quilt show with 5 ribbons for 6 entries (likely this describes the 1940 Detroit contest) her collection of Detroit News ribbons was substantial.

Family owners of Gasperik quilts have over a dozen surviving Illinois State Fair ribbons, all of which were awarded after the Detroit quilt contests and shows had ceased. There was precious little in the physical materials available to me in our family's 'Gasperik Quilt Archive' which indicated that Detroit had been so critically important to Mary Gasperik's quilt life. It was only by way of examining the old newspapers on microfilm that I came to understand the importance of Detroit in my grandmother's quilting life.

Because it required so much work and time, finding my grandmother in all this material, I realized that it was important to scan and save the quilt columns, because far more than my own grandmother's quilt life is captured there. This material reflects the broad universe of American, and especially Michigan, quilt life in detail after detail, and all of this during a period when quilting was a very popular and commercially well-supported activity. I decided it would be valuable to other potential researchers if I saved these quilt columns as scans, even though many of them are, admittedly, of poor quality partly because of problems in the original filming but also because the computer scanning and saving options available to me at my public library changed over 8 years. Ultimately, the software which allowed me to easily read those old newspapers, find the relevant columns and capture and preserve them, became outdated, unmaintained; and its availability was discontinued on the library's machines. I am lucky that I felt I had already captured the parameters of The Detroit News quilt phenomenon before it became clear that I would not be able to continue to read film in the convenient way I had been doing. Inquiries to The Detroit News about potential digitization of their newspaper archive gave me the impression that the entire newspaper archive was going to be digitized, but to my knowledge it has not been done. At this point, the scans I collected and shared with The Quilt Index, along whatever old quilt albums have been preserved, collected and digitized, are the best resource to examine the entire array of Detroit News quilt columns.

In addition to saving the Detroit News scans that I began sending from the Santa Monica library to my home computer in March 2007, I printed them out at home, and collected them in thick binders, of which there are now ten. After the first few rounds of microfilm reading, I could see that there were significant events of which I failed to take notice the first time I downloaded, printed and read those quilt columns at home. Mention of events and people which didn't appear significant upon first glance turned out to be important at a later time. Realizing this, I created a document in which to record those things I suspected could be especially noteworthy. I did this as a Word document so that I could use its "find" option to trace over time the names of individuals, or clubs or pattern names, for example. This running (and growing) document records the dates and subjects of a very small number of the columns that I read, scanned and collected. In this Word document I included direct quotations about things that I suspected would turn out to be important in allowing me to later summarize, or reconstruct, the overall quilt history of The Detroit News. Like my binders full of quilt column printouts, that document grew. It is now called "Chronological List of Selected Detroit News Quilt Columns Compiled by Susan Salser". I am pleased to be able to share this document with Quilt Index users and I hope there are quilt researchers out there who will find it useful for their own research purposes, or to users of The Quilt Index who simply would like to read primary source material which encapsulates

so well the substance and flavor of The Detroit News quilt phenomenon of 1932 through 1942.

With the completion of my Chronological List document, I feel I have finished my personal Gasperik Detroit News quilt project. I had requested, received, and examined microfilm of all of the The Detroit News newspapers published between March 1, 1932 and January 31, 1943. March 1, 1932 is 6 months before creation of the newspaper's quilt club was announced and it is well over a year before the first Detroit News quilt show and contest was held in November 1933. Quilt Club Corner (and the quilt shows associated with it) ended in January 1942. The length of that span of time (1932-1942) accounts for the length of my Chronological List. It was very helpful to be able to thumb through the pages of those ten notebooks and literally watch the history flow by. Those ten binders are the resource I used, in 2015, to make final corrections and additions to the running Chronological List document that I had been updating since 2007. Compiling the Chronological List enabled me to make judgments and come to conclusions.

By luck and investigative persistence, I even managed to find and capture (without needing to request microfilm of all the newspapers between February 1943 and the 1958 retirement of Edith B. Crumb from The Detroit News!) that April 16, 1955 column in which Edith Crumb herself recalled and summarized, with a mixture of heartfelt nostalgia and precision, the history of her quilt club and those quilt shows she had created and managed for her newspaper more than a decade earlier.

It is my hope that my Chronological List document, along with the scans compiled from Detroit News microfilm of the same period, now being transcribed and presented on The Quilt Index, will become a useful research tool for others who may wish to look for traces of their own antique quilts in the quilts described by Edith Crumb in her newspaper columns. These descriptions, which are detailed and often accompanied by (black and white) photographs, number well over 100. They include antique quilts as well as contemporary ones. Interested researchers may find mention of their ancestors in some of Edith Crumb's descriptions of various quilts and quilting events. Edith regularly published the names and addresses and birthdates of quilt club members. She regularly featured group photographs of quilting groups, both church-connected and neighborhood-connected. I counted 124 such group photos in my binders. I occasionally used the Quilt Index's search option to see if quilts or quilters I was reading about on microfilm were already mentioned in The Quilt Index. Of the names I searched, none were already known to The Quilt Index except for three of the "stars" of the Quilt Club Corner - Mrs. Charles Voelker, Mrs. Arthur Miller and my own grandmother, Mary Gasperik. If the collected scans of The Detroit News quilt columns, perhaps made more inviting by consulting my Chronological List, prove useful, then perhaps some these 'missing' quilts will be found and acknowledged.

I must apologize for devoting so much attention, in this introduction, to my quilter grandmother, Mary Gasperik. She IS the reason I began this project. However, the reason I continued it, year after year (even after I had collected as much information about her as I believe could be had from this source; and even after I determined the time parameters of the quilt club and quilt shows), is that I came to realize that The Detroit News Quilt Club Corner, and the quilt shows and contests directed by the News quilt club editor, Edith B. Crumb, are a major but largely unrecognized phenomenon in American quilt history. The collected columns from The Detroit News comprise an excellent primary resource of information about a period in which quilting flourished and expanded greatly in America.

Throughout my Chronological List of specific articles from The Detroit News, whose primary purpose was to record direct quotations, I occasionally indulged in expressing a personal opinion or inserting an observation or reminder. I preface such comments with the words “Note from SKS:...” Those are my initials. Those notes contain my personal opinions, and not information taken directly from the newspaper, although the comments sometimes attempt to summarize information which I DID learn from reading many newspapers.

For a summary about The Detroit News quilt club and its quilt shows, see Quilts in Everyday Life, 1855-1955, by Janet E. Finley (Arglen, PA, Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 2012), in its “Appendix: The Detroit News Quilt Club Corner and Edith B. Crumb, by Susan Salser”, pp 181-188. This article includes 12 photographs from The Detroit News archives showing 4 of the quilts shows, and 4 different local quilt groups.

When I began in March 2007 my Detroit News research project, looking for mention of my grandmother and her quilts, I was not yet a grandmother myself. When I finished it in 2015 I was grandmother to six wonderful grandchildren. Here I am with the five eldest on vacation in Coronado, California in 2016.



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