NO. 19



Gladys Reid Holton

Gladys Reid Holton, founder and first President of the Genesee Valley Quilt Association. The club, founded in 1936, is believed to be the oldest quilt study club in the United States.



Gladys Reid Holton
by Joyce Gross

Most of the material for this article came from a lengthy interview with Gladys Reid Holton in October 1980 when I spent several days as a guest of her daughter, Jane des Grange in her home in Oneonta, N.Y. At the time Mrs. Holton was recovering from a stroke and was living with her daughter and a darling little grey kitten.

Prior to my visit we had several phone visits but nothing prepared me for their warmth and hospitality. It was only a matter of minutes before we were on first name basis and knew we were kindred souls. The remaining time was an experience I will long remember.

This marvelous woman with a keen sense of humor and a wonderful knack of story telling kept me entertained and fascinated for almost 12 straight hours. I can well imagine how popular her lectures were!

Gladys Reid Holton was born June 29, 1898 in Auburn, N.Y. to Frances Chapin and Charles Reid. Her father was a farmer/mechanic and they lived on the farm until she was 8 or 10 years old, when they moved to Port Byron on the Erie Canal. Her father worked in a factory where the first American locomotive to be sold to Japan was made. He tried fanning for a short time before selling the land during WWI when land prices were high. He then went to work for the N.Y. Central where he started at the bottom and rose to be a section leader.

Mrs. Holton learned quiltmaking from her father's sister, "Aunt Emily" who came every winter to stay with the family because it was too cold where she lived. To Gladys she was an old old woman who was always making her scraps of material into quilts.

One day her aunt said, "I never see you with any handiwork. Let me give you some scraps so you can

make your own quilt." She helped the little girl cut out the hexagons and showed her how to sew the pieces together to make a <u>Honeycomb</u> When the top was finished her mother put it in a quilt frame and invited the neighbors to come in and quilt it. Unfortunately there is no record of what happened to that first quilt.

Gladys Reid attended high school in Port Byron, graduating in 1916. She said, "As a student I loved everything in books - except German."

Her mother was also a quilting influence. She always had a guilt on the frame and Gladys remembers being welcomed home from school by her mother at the frame, quilting.

After high school she went to Genesee, a teacher's training school, where she earned her state license to teach. Her teachers there frequently told her she was a born teacher, that she could teach anybody anything. Teaching changed her life.

After Genesee she applied for two teaching positions - Port Chester N.Y. and Delevan N.Y. Both accepted her. Now she was faced with a real dilemma: she must decide whether she should go to the city and learn new things or stay in a farming community. To postpone the decision she accepted both positions, then turned around and accepted a post at Webster, N Y, where she knew the principal

Mr. Burr warned her she was to have a "third grade which is plenty tough." She was a little frightened at first, but she was firm, and soon she and the class got along beautifully.

Soon after meeting her husband Elston, he gave her a ring. They weren't engaged but Elston thought "it might discourage the other fellows." She kept it four years before she agreed to marry him. They were married on Aug. 12, 1922 in the Methodist Church in Port Byron.

She stopped teaching when she became pregnant and her only child Jane was born in 1926. One day after she retired, the teachers from her old school came to her little lake cottage for a meeting and asked her what she was doing. She laid her quilts on the table and gave an impromptu talk. She also told a story about the patterns.

A month later, the principal asked her to give a lecture for which she would receive \$25.00. She made some more blocks, folded her quilts into a basket and Elston took her into New York where she spoke to about 100 teachers. She lectured and then they asked questions. Everyone loved it and soon the word spread that it was a good lecture. One



photo courtesy of Genesee Valley Quilt Association.

after another lecture opened up to her -she was on her way to a new career.

Elston was out of work so the new career came at an opportune time. She charged \$5.00 a lecture. Churches soon learned it was an excellent money raiser when they charged each member \$1.00

Each time she talked she was asked for another engagement. She heard from friends that people were saying, "Don't worry, Mrs. Holton will make money for you. She gives fine talks and has lots of stories from quilt owners."

One winter she gave 200 lectures. By this time her husband had a job but she enjoyed lecturing so much she didn't want to stop. She drove herself to the lectures which were mostly in Munroe County.

She always asked the sponsoring club to ask their members to bring quilts. She would ask the owners to tell as much about the quilt as they could. Then she would tell the group what she knew about the pattern, etc. She began collecting names and addresses of quilt owners and the people interested in quiltmaking.

When she lectured, Mrs Holton always took quilt blocks and quilts. Many times she would hang the quilts herself on blackboards or whatever was available to create a nice atmosphere. She also took her file of patterns to give copies to anyone who asked for them.

In 1935 the Rochester Museum of Arts and Sciences asked her to form a quilt club and join their Hobby Council. Letters went out to names and addresses she had collected so faithfully through the years.

Mrs Holton chose Jan 30, 1936 as the day for the first meeting. The Museum was going to sponsor the club and the first meeting was held there. THE DEMOCRAT & CHRONICLE of Dec 14, 1941 published an article by Philota M Brydges entitled, "Quilt Makers Began Five Years Ago." "Although the day was blustery, 11 women ... me and formed the organization and elected the officers; President, Gladys R Holton; Vice-President and Secretary, Mrs Philota M Brydges; Treasurer. Mrs W R Bloor"

Mrs Holton was also given, for her, a pleasant task of writing a monthly column about quilts for the MUSEUM SERVICE BULLETIN She wrote about a different pattern each month, many times choosing a seasonal pattern such as <u>Autumn Leaves</u> for October or <u>Snow Flake</u> for January.

The summer of the group's first year Gladys Holton was voted "The Best Mother of the Year" and given an all-expense paid scholarship to Cornell University. Her husband took care of Jane.

Mrs Holton remained president for three years. As she explains it, "I wanted them to get started right. I wanted them to be happy and to have fun. I told them, 'Don't bring petty jealousies into the meetings.'" At the end of the three years she felt the group was on the right track so she urged them to get a new president. She continued to come to meetings and was always willing to assist, pour tea or be a hostess. Several members said, "She was always charming and never tried to take over or be bossy."

Mrs Holton puts it, "They still make a 'suss' (fuss) over me. "Suss" is a family word left over from Jane's baby days.

In 1938 she took a trip which was referred to as "Western Quilt Seesing Trip" in Philota Brydges pamphlet "A History of the Genesee Valley Quilt Association" (1940) Mrs Brydges wrote "Mrs Holton reported stopping in Walworth Wisc to visit one of our absentee members, Mrs McElwain in her nationally known Quilt Shop; she uses Rock River Cotton exclusively in her quilts.

In 1939 the Assoc Country Women of America voted Mrs Holton a North American delegate to their conference in London. She gave a speech on "Handicrafts of North America" and was presented to the Queen in a white lace dress. She remembers a representative of the Queen remarking to her, "You are indeed just right."

For awhile she was concerned about whether she should go and was pleased when she consulted an astrologer that the signs were favorable.

This time her mother-in-law stayed with Jane. Mrs Holton recalled the trip to me, "We went by boat with three persons from Cincinnati. We went to



London, North Hampton by the North Sea to Burgon where it was May. I.n Norway I took the railroad up to the top of the mountain where it was winter. I came down the mountain to Oslo by train. The International Country Women's Assoc had made arrangements for me to stay there in a private home. I left by train to go to Copenhagen where I stayed with a bishop's family for two weeks. I went from there to Amsterdam. From Amsterdam I went to Paris and by this time I was concerned about the war. I felt I really should go home."

Philota Brydges wrote in THE HISTORY OF THE GENESEE VALLEY QUILT ASSOCIATION, "On her return (on the Queen Mary's last voyage)* she brought numerous articles of needlework and design, and gave many talks and displays for our benefit. She brought us each a Parisian gift, a notebook for our quilting ideas; while traveling through the different countries she compiled a cook book (of national dishes) and odd and unusual dishes.

In 1945, she was hired by the Rochester Museum of Art & Sciences as Curator of History. She remained in that position until 1968 when she retired. The Strong Doll Museum quickly hired her and in appreciation for her work, Mrs Strong has given her an

apartment at the Museum for as long as she lives.

In 1947 Mrs Holton made another trip to Europe and the Scandinavian countries. She went alone because she likes to travel by herself and do exactly as she pleases. This time she had saved her money so she "would not have to go 'cheap'". She bought a lot because she says, "I am a buyer! I am never happier than when I am buying!"

Elston Holton died Dec 16, 1963.

Miss Helen Shepherd, a friend of Gladys Holton's told me on the phone, "Gladys is one of those women who is very capable. She can give easy-to-follow directions as to how she wants it done. She is well-organized but not bossy. She has a good sense of humor and is quite jolly. She is indeed a 'very special person'"

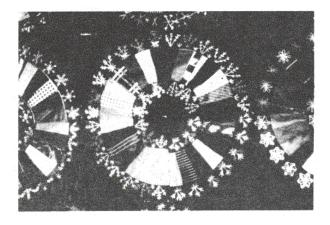
One of Miss Shepherd's favorite stories has to do with an older teacher in Honeoye Falls who married a widower. After a year he died and she went back to teaching. When she retired she found a trunk in the attic that had evidently belonged to her husband's first wife. In going through it, she found some blocks of a <u>Grandmother's</u> Fan. She knew of Miss Shepherd's interest in quilts and brought the blocks over to her

in hopes she could help her decide what to do with them. There was a good deal of embroidery on them which was quite pretty and well done but there was simply not enough blocks to make a quilt. She made some suggestions but the teacher left with no decision made.

Some time later the teacher died and after 10 days Miss Shepherd was passing the house and noticed some cars out in front. She decided to be bold and went to the door. She found the teacher's sister, whom Miss Shepherd knew, going through things.

Miss Shepherd inquired politely about the quilt blocks and the sister went quickly to the closet and came back with the bundle of blocks.

Much to Miss Shepherd's amazement there was a note attached to them reading, "If no one else wants them, give them to Miss Holton at the Museum." Though Miss Shepherd would have loved to have them she took them to Mrs Holton who promptly tossed them back into Miss Shepherd's lap and suggested she "do something with them"



Miss Shepherd took them to the Club and asked for suggestions. One woman said, "You can't do anything with them because you will never be able to match the colors of fabrics and embroidery floss." To Miss Shepherd that was like waving a red flag in her face and it was a real challenge to find just the right pieces.

"I put the blocks together to form a ring almost like a <u>Dresden Plate</u> When I took it to the Club, no one could tell which were the old ones and which were new."

Peg Tuttle, another of Gladys Holton's friends, became acquainted with her when they were working on the Club's historical bicentennial quilt in 1975. Mrs Tuttle was chairman of the group and she and her committee had gone to Mrs Holton's. She remembers drawer after drawer of files were pulled out for ideas of old buildings and homes. She says of; her

friend, "She is a down-to-earth, every day person with an extraordinary talent for organization."

Mrs Holton, her daughter Jane and her granddaughter Lynne went to Europe in 1975. After a time together Jane went to Holland and her mother went to Sweden to take weaving lessons.

In 1978 Mrs Holton took out for Venezuela on her last research trip. She was looking for items dealing with South American cut work. In 1979, she took a vacation in Curacao.

Gladys Holton enjoys telling stories on herself. "One night I was lecturing with both husbands and wives in attendance. I had stressed using all of the left over fabric in quilts as one would use left over food. The next year when I went to lecture in a nearby town, a woman came up and began berating me.

"I couldn't figure out why she was so angry until she told me that she used a cup of cold salmon and a cup of raspberries for her dinner. " Gladys tried to explain but was laughing so hard all she could hear was the woman saying, "But you told us to use it all up!"

Another time when she had finished her lecture and the club's business meeting was in progress, she was surprised to hear the President announce, "We're taking up a collection so we can hire some good speakers. Mrs Holton said she had many a laugh at that one and when she returned she teased the group about not having collected enough money to get the good speakers.

When I was leaving, Mrs Holton remarked "Those who can, do and those who can't teach! - That's me! At home I have five drawers of patterns for all the crafts. I can teach anything."

And I believe she can!

Gladys Reid Holton fell and broke her leg last year and is recovering while entertaining her visitors with anecdotes and stories. Her 84th birthday is June 29 and if you wish to send' a card or note address it c/o her daughter Jane des Grange, 55 Dietz, Oneonta, N Y 13820.

I would like to thank Jane des Grange, Ellen Camfield, The Genesee Valley Quilt Association, Peg Tuttle, Helen Shepherd, Pine Eisfeller for making this article possible. They shared material and thoughts





Top row, left to right) Florence Lourette displays her prize winning <u>Garden</u> quilt, Gladys Reid Holton pours at the Annual Tea 1967, Genesee Valley Quilt Club's <u>Bicentennial</u> quilt. Bottom row) Mrs. Lourette quilting, Edna Curtis pours punch at the Annual Tea 1963, new members getting personal instruction 1964.

Genesee Valley Quilt Club

Charter members: Mrs Carrie Ayers, Mrs W.R. Bloor, Mrs Geo Brydges, Mrs E.A. Emery, Mrs Gertrude Goodwin, Mrs Catherine Greenbaum, Mrs Leonard Hall, Mrs Elston Holton, Mrs Minnie Marsh and Mrs David Nundy.

Objective: for people interested in quilts and quilting to come together for inspiration and sharing of knowledge and experience in quilting.

The following are excerpts from Philota Mahar Brydges HISTORY OF THE GENESEE VALLEY QUILT ASSOCIATION. (n.d. but presumed to be 1941.

"A very interesting quilt club, sponsored by the Rochester Museum of Arts and Sciences, was organized by Mrs Gladys Reid Holton at the Museum Bldg, Edgerton Park on Jan 30, 1936. The Museum loaned nine beautiful quilts which, together with Mrs Holton's own collection were used for the

afternoon's study and were greatly enjoyed.

"...the day was exceptionally blustery (but) eleven ladies ... formed the organization and elected officers; Pres Mrs Gladys Reid Holton; Vice Pres & Scribe, Mrs Lota M Brydges; Treas Mrs W R Bloor. It was decided to hold meetings at 2 pm the last Thursday of each month." Other organizational decisions were left until later.

"One of the first prize quilts to be displayed was Mrs Greenbaum's <u>Century of Progress</u> which won the award at the Rochester Centennial Exposition; another was Mrs Beaudry's <u>Sunburst</u> which was awarded Honorable Mention at Detroit...

"It was quite a struggle for existence those first few months for, not only did the weather man conspire against us but our president ... won a scholarship and was away at Cornell most of the summer; she returned in time to manage our exhibit at the Hobby Shop held in connection with the last Ro-Chester Exposition.

"... we exhibited as "An Old Fashioned Quilting Party in a Colonial Kitchen" ... (we) had a working exhibit on some antique frames; antique furniture was used and members were dressed in colonial costume. About 50 quilts were displayed and we were delighted to receive the award No 3 for our efforts.

"Then the Council "baby" began to grow rapidly. It was decided to have dues of \$1.00 per year ... the club name' Genesee Valley Quilt Association' was adopted.

"... we were treated to a lecture on quilts by Mrs Ada Jones of Herkimer ... she has since moved to Rochester, joined our club and become one of our most valued advisors.

"The second year of our existence was one of great expansion; Increased membership enabled us to pay our way as to Council participation and mimeographed minutes; more elaborate programs and guest speakers Picnic meetings for the summer months were started ... Members who took trips ... brought back patterns and ideas from expert quilters whom they met. Valuable literature was obtained from all parts of the country, so a small library was started ...

"In 1938, our interest was aroused as to the cotton filling for our quilts; the Mountain Mist Co sent us literature and advised us of quilt displays at the local stores; The Lockport Cotton Co sent us their representative, Miss Jenkins who gave us a lecture and display of quilts ... For the June meeting we chartered a bus ... and went to (the) Lockport factory. This was a wonderful experience for we saw the making of the batts from the bales of cotton to the finished product; also the processing of cotton for fire-proofing ...

"In this year our constitution and by-laws were drawn up and upon their ratification, we emerged a full-fledged club.

"In 1939 ... we elected a new president, Mrs Cook. In this year we started ... all, day meetings; we meet at 10:30 a.m., bring our lunch, and members who have a finished top, may bring it with lining and filling which we baste together ... we then have our regular business meeting at 1:30 with visitors welcome ...

"At the close of 1939 our membership had grown to 53 ...

"Mrs Cook was reelected president for 1940. This year(s)... most notable achievement being the winning of the World's Fair prize by Mrs Lourette for her Garden Quilt this is an exquisite copy of a very old



Quilts and more quilts occupy Mrs. Walker Lee and Mrs. Florence E. Larette, left to right, members of the Genesee Valley Quilt Club sponsoring a quilting exhibit today and tomorrow at 87-91 Clinton Ave. S. The exhibit is part of the Hobby Show of the Rochester Museum of Arts and Sciences.

quilt and her choice of colors and fine needlework earned her a well deserved honor and also a monetary award.*

"Mrs Walker Lee was elected president in 1941. Her beautiful <u>Snowflake</u> quilt took 1st prize in the DEMOCRAT & CHRONICLE Needlework Show ... It is a masterpiece of needlework with its cameo-like stuffing and tiny stitchery. Several others in our Club have also joined the 11 stitches to the inch society.

*In some publicity, her name is misspelled "Laurette". Letters from Florence Lourette to Bertha Stenge about the prize appeared in the JOURNAL, Summer 1980.

Genesee Valley Quilt Association Hears Authorities THE GVQA HEARS MISS JENKINS

The following are excerpts from the GVQA minutes of Nov 18, 1939

"The regular Nov meeting of the Genesee Valley Quilt Club* met in the Lecture Hall at the Municipal Museum on Thurs Nov 18, with 39 members and 35 guests present.

"our guest speaker of the day, Miss Olivia M Jenkins, cotton stylist and quilting authority representing the Lockport Cotton Co could tell our anxiously waiting guests and members about our Hobby ... and introduce her magnificent display of quilts

"Miss Jenkins told us that Quilting first started in 2640 B.C. and was introduced in the U.S. by the Dutch women who settled in New York State and that a revival of quiltmaking always follows a war, as women have little money to spend except for the necessities of life ... Consequently (they) turn their hands to making things.

"There are 13 quilts in Miss Jenkins' display, many of them valued at hundreds of dollars and were all made by the Kentucky Mountaineers ... Miss Jenkins used to do a good bit of quilt making but as she now travels all over the U.S. lecturing on quilts, has no time for it

In the southern states it is the custom for the mountain girls to make thirteen quilt tops before she is engaged. Then when she has pledged her troth she calls in her friends to guilt them, in this way her engagement is announced. A betrothal quilt always contains a heart somewhere in the pattern. Miss Jenkins would suggest that every woman who is making a quilt learn as much as possible about the history of the pattern. Miss Jenkins also says that any woman who has ingenuity and patience can make a beautiful quilt and it is a lovely heirloom, and just as fascinating as working a jigsaw puzzle. Some of the names of Miss Jenkin's collection of quilts are Mrs Cleveland's Choice, North Star, Cross Stitch Bouquet, Spring Time Bouquet, Path Thru the Woods, Wreath of Roses, Lincoln's Quilt, Slumberland, The Chief, Springtime, Wild Rose and Pine Tree all patterns which may be secured from the Lockport Cotton Batting Company.

* The terms "Association" and "Club" seem to be used interchangeably in and on their literature.

Ed note: The reader should be aware not all quilt historians agree with some of these theories which were accepted as fact in the 1930s.

THE GVQA HEARS PINE EISFELLER

Pine Eisfeller is a noted authority on Hawaiian quilts and a multi-prize winner at the New York State Fair before winning the 2nd Grand Prize in the 1942 WOMAN'S DAY Needlework Contest. Articles about her appeared in Winter 1980

The following letters are excerpts from the letters written by Pine Eisfeller to Gladys Reid Holton, Pres of the GVQA, used by permission of the Genesee Valley Quilt Association from their extension scrapbook collection.

Fort Ontario, N.Y. Sept 27, 1936

Dear Mrs Holton:

...will gladly come to see you the last Thursday in October.

Will have eight finished quilts and some in different states of completion. I have 60 different patterns but it is hard to see just what the finished quilt would be like from them. I do not sell the patterns, but if anyone should be interested in one I will cut and baste it for three dollars.

Sincerely yours (signed) Pine L Eisfeller

Fort Ontario
Oct 2, 1936
Dear Mrs Holton

"In reply ... I would like to ask you to make your own program. It is your club and you know what you are used to doing and I will gladly abide by what you suggest. My great trouble is when I once get started on Hawaiian Quilts and Hawaii, I forget to quit and so if there is a limitation on my time, I will promise to stop when the set time comes.

"I must admit to you I am not used to speaking in public and so I hope you will make allowances for me. However, what I lack in experience, I think I make up in enthusiasm as these quilts are my "hobby" and I am "crazy" (my husband says) about them..

Sincerely yours (signed) Pine L Eisfeller

The following article is from the MUSEUM MONTHLY SERVICE of Dec. 1936 and is a resume of the talk given by Mrs Eisfeller. It was written by Gladys Holton.

HAWAIIAN QUILTS

The making of the quilts by Hawaiian women dates back to 1820, to the days when the missionary women taught the native women to sew.

cont

In the old Hawaiian homes there were no scrap bags. The garments were cut full and straight, taking the full width of the cloth consequently little was left for quilt pieces New material was not cut into bits to be sewn together but instead was treated in one large piece. For this reason Hawaiian quilts differ from any other quilt designs in that they are not made from blocks pieced together, but the entire quilt is one large block of unified design. Usually it consists of a central motif and border of highly intricate pattern, which is cut out in one piece, placed over the plain background, basted down and then very carefully hemmed.

To one unfamiliar with Hawaii, no doubt, many of the quilt names and their designs will appear most unique. This is due not to lack of logic on the part of the designer, but to the difficulty of interpreting in English the allegorical thought of the Hawaiian and the subtlety of his expression. Then too, there is not necessarily any connection between the actual design and the theme. Many a Hawaiian women worked out in her quilt some meaning known only to herself gave it a name foreign to the subject and kept the

interpretation secret. Not all quilt designs are symbolic, in fact, any new design or subject that struck the fancy of the maker was produced in a quilt. The chandelier in the palace when it was new was a favorite subject ... The Hawaiian women drew upon her garden for designs as well as such subjects as the wide-spread tentacles of the octopus, the turtle and the crescent moon. Many historical themes often adorn the Hawaiian quilts.

Close friends often designed quilts for one another. Patterns were dedicated to a person as a mark of respect or love, as a book or poem is dedicated by the author. Designs without number were dedicated to the beloved Queen Liliuokalani. Upon the abdication of the queen and the consequent lowering of the flag, many of the Hawaiian people feared that they would not again be permitted to fly the emblem of their kingdom. They turned to the quilt as a means of perpetuating both the flag and the coat-of-arms.

In an interview with Joyce Gross, Gladys Reid Holton, President of the GVQA remarked, "I remember the talk given by Mrs Eisfeller. I have always been sorry I didn't buy one of her tops. She could really make quilts!"

Genesee Valley Quilt Association

cont from pg 6

"Three quilts of heavy woolen material were made and tacked at morning meetings, then given to the British War Relief Comm. We have also made a small Red Cross Donation.

"Picnic meetings (were held) this summer...

"We hung 132 completed, hand made quilts and about 60 others in all stages of construction (for a Quilt Hobby show of our own) For four days the show was open to the general public and the response was tremendous."

The last meeting of the year was a traditional Christmas Party.

In reading the minutes from 1941 to 1981 I felt the strength of the club comes from the fact that it remained essentially the same. They have changed the meeting place to the Masonic Temple but they still meet the last Thursday of each month. They continue to baste member's quilts in the morning, have a bag lunch and then a business meeting. The April meeting is always the Annual Tea and exhibit of member's quilts.

Congratulations to the Genesee Valley Quilt Club and to Mrs Holton

Quilt Exhibit at Knoxville

"Quilts Warm the World" is the title of three quilt exhibits which will hang from May through October, 82, the same period as the World's Fair. The exhibits are open to the public Mon-Fri. 9:00 am to 5:00 pm at the Frank H. McClung Museum on the Univ. of Tenn. campus in Knoxville. There is no admission charge.

The three exhibits scheduled are: May & June, "Quilts of Famous U.S. Quilt Makers", July & Aug., "Antique Quilts From Across the U.S.", Sept. & Oct., "Tennessee Quilts, New & Old". The first is an invitational show sponsored by the Tenn. Valley Quilters' Assoc., an affiliate of the National Quilting Assoc.

Quilts featured are by Chris Edmonds, Flavis Glover, Maria McCormick-Snyder, Judy Mathieson, Philomenia Wiechec, Dixie Haywood, Nancy Halpern, Marjorie Puckett, Sue Rodgers, Elizabeth Voris, Fay Goldey, Bernice Enyeart, Donna Andrews, Deanna Powell, Patty Statham, Jane Halo, Pat Cox, Pat Kyser and Helen Kelley.