

QUILTING BEES



Reprinted from the NEW YORK PRESS,
Sunday, July 12, 1914

The days of the quilting bee are over.

"I Was Seeing Nellie Home" may still be sung in the suburbs, but the "From Aunt Dinah's Quilting Party" has lost its significance.

Quilting is a lost art. It has now evolved itself into the tango as a social stunt, and no more do we have those delightful little gossip parties our grandmothers used to indulge in over the quilting frame when the neighbors came to help make the quilt - and eat up the victuals. These days neighbors do not even know each other, especially in New York, and there wouldn't be room to set up the quilting frame anyway. So, instead of those charming old designs of conventional birds and flowers, historic of the Revolution, the present day generation has been contenting itself with counterpanes.

But the reason the present day generation has been contenting itself with counterpanes is doubtless because it does not really know the beauty of the old fashioned quilt. Once in a while one of those dear old quilts, reminiscent of parties, bees and neighborly knocks (sic) is dug up in the possession of some one who has kept it tucked away with the family pedigree, and then there is a burst of admiration and a desire to copy.

That is exactly what has happened out in Rye, N Y. Some one had a beautiful old quilt - 110 years old, to be exact - the envy of the neighborhood. Chief among the old quilt's admirers was Mrs J B Putnam, wife of J B Putnam, publisher, and the thought occurred to her, "Why not copy the quilt, and revive a lost art?" In talking her idea over, she discovered that Mrs Daniel O'Day, a neighbor of a mile or two distant (for it is real country out in Rye) knew something about how the quilts were put together. There was, at that

time, a woman's exchange, and somehow orders for the old quilt patterns of revolutionary days began coming in, but there are few members of the exchange conversant with the work.

Mrs Putnam talked the matter over with Mrs O'Day, and the upshot was that Mrs O'Day offered to teach the women the lost art of quilting, and so the Quilting Bee was established.

At first it was only in conjunction with the Woman's Exchange, but the Woman's Exchange put it too on the philanthropic basis, and the idea of Mrs Putnam was to revive the lost art as a self-supporting and paying industry, and furnish employment for the women of Rye who needed employment, just as Elbert Hubbard started the Roycroft shops of East Aurora.

Money was, of course, needed to finance the industry till it should grow to be self supporting. So Mrs Putnam, Mrs O'Day and Mrs A T Chester put their heads together, and decided that they would finance what was to be known as the "Quilting Bee", for the purpose of reviving the quilting art, and would take contracts for quilts that



should match Colonial furnishings in Colonial houses. Mrs O'Day owns such a house herself, and had often felt the need of quilts to harmonize with Colonial beds.

Now, if you should journey out to Rye some day, as you alight from the train you will doubtless cast your glance across the street, and there you will see a little house exploiting a sign, "The Quilting Bee." It looks something like a restaurant at first glance, those dear little places, one sometimes finds when motoring, with jam on the shelves and molasses cake in the oven, but on second observation you find it is more like a little curio shop. It has been there just two months.

Maybe you will be curious enough to step inside, and once inside you will be confronted with all sorts of beautiful quilt designs worked up into tea trays, bed - quilts, dinner wagons, work baskets, baby wagons, and what not. And you will find there lots of interesting other things, from toys up, all the handiwork of residents of Rye...

Then if you are very fortunate you may find Mrs Putnam herself there - a very interesting woman... charming to talk to - and she will take you all through the shop, and upstairs into the workroom, and show you how it is all done - how all those beautiful designs are carried out. Most of the designing, by the way, is done by Mrs O'Day, whose art is far famed in social circles.

"This is an industry for reviving the art of quilted, felled and patchwork bed-spreads" Mrs Putnam will tell you, "and it has grown unexpectedly. We now have on hand any number of orders. I really believe it is going to be a paying industry in a very short time. Our workroom already is self supporting."

"But come upstairs, and see our workroom" says Mrs Putnam... And you follow to a floor above where girls are at work on quilts set up on frames, taking the tiniest of stitches in following out the drawn design. In another room the girls are cutting out the figures, fruits, flowers, conventional strips and circles, to be felled on.

"All those little pieces you see the girls working upon," Mrs Putnam will tell you, "have been tubbed before they were cut out. That insures the quilt lasting forever and standing the laundry without changing color. In copying some of the older designs we had a great deal of trouble to reproduce the old Washington prints.

Finally we found the only place in the United States where they are still manufactured. "See here," and she picked up a quilt in a most elaborate ivy leaf design. "The original of this quilt is 120 years old. It belongs to Mrs Gately of Mamaronock. You notice there is not one inch without handwork."

The Washington prints, referred to, are old fashioned calico, sprinkled thickly with tiny dots or tiny conventional flow-ers. The 120-year-old design has the ivy leaves so quilted round in tiny stitches that they stand out as if padded.

"Just think!" says Mrs Putnam, "The original of that quilt was part of a wedding trousseau 120 years ago!"

One of the favorite designs is the prim-rose and cogwheel design ... and still another is the blue bird design, (see pg 12) From the picture some idea may be had of how the ... birds have first to be cut out, and then felled on to muslin, then the quilting begins. To make one quilt of the ordinary design it would take one woman a month at least...

They have also taken up the art of making hooked and braided rag rugs in this wonderful shop run by society women for the benefit of the community...

For 23" Blue Bird quilt block pattern send \$1.00 & SASE to Box 5427, Mill Valley CA 94942

PECOLIA WARNER - cont from pg 16

Pecolia acknowledged that making quilts is hard work, but this did not discourage her. She sold some of her quilts, but also gave many away: "I don't necessarily altogether piece them for myself. I like to help people with them . . . I like to be doing something, stay in practice." The most important motivation for Pecolia's quilting was the belief that through her art she fulfilled her worldly purpose: "It's a gift from God to be able to do this, because if it weren't for Him I couldn't do it. I wouldn't have the knowledge to do it. . . I worked that to grow up in me, of making quilts. That was a gift, that's my talent. Making quilts, that's my calling. And since I learned when I was young I haven't forgotten it."

From: TEN AFRO-AMERICAN QUILTERS, catalog for the exhibit of the same name by Maude Southwell Wahlman and Ella King Torrey, The Center for The Study of Southern Culture, The University of Mississippi, 1983.

PECOLIA WARNER



Born Mar 9, 1901, Rose Hill, Mississippi
Died Mar 25, 1983, Yazoo City, Mississippi

Pecolia Jackson Warner was the ninth child in a family of eleven children. Her mother, Katie Brant, had five children by her first husband, William Jackson and six children with her second husband. The family lived and worked on a plantation in the Mississippi Delta. Pecolia's mother, a college graduate, had been a school teacher before she married. Determined that her children be educated, she taught them at home when they were small, and in the evenings when they were old enough to spend days working in the fields. In addition, she trained Pecolia in the skills that Pecolia used to support herself as a cook, housekeeper, nurse's aide and professional quilter.

Pecolia learned to make quilts by watching her mother; "I just be sitting side of her. I'd get the scissors and cut me out something, and be doing it just like I see her doing. And she bought me a little old thimble and a needle and everything. That's the way I learned how to sew. From then on I'd be sewing and piecing and if I didn't do it right she'd pull it out and make me do it again." The first quilt top Pecolia pieced by herself was made of "strings", ... "I got little strings like your fingers and commenced to sewing them together. As I got them long enough for the bed, I pieced up sixteen of them, and my mother gave me some old stuff to strip it with. And when I got me a string, then she quilted it out for me and she named it "Spider Leg." Pecolia's mother used hanging frames for quilting, but Pecolia

always preferred putting her frames on saw-horses; she quilted on her bed, and even used her dining room table as a quilting surface.

Pecolia first married in 1921. She had three more marriages until 1972 when she married Sam Warner. In 1939 she moved to Chicago, finally returning to her native Mississippi in 1968. She never had children. For most of her life, Pecolia cooked and cleaned for other people, but always found time to make quilts: "From the time I learned how, I lived in big cities. I made quilts, and I sold them. They wasn't paying too much, but I made them, to keep myself company, keep my mind occupied... I made quilts and I worked. I stayed on the premises in the day cause of the kids and cooking. The night, when I get off, go in my room, got my quilt pattern and things, go to sewing. When the baby's asleep and I done cooking, I'm still sewing. To keep my mind occupied, I could always find something to do."

The hallmark of Pecolia's quilting style is her technical and artistic mastery. Pecolia's quilts radiated her self confidence. There was nothing haphazard about her handwork; she was careful and sure in her piecing: "When you cutting them little bitty pieces you got to study how to put them together, and you want it to hit just right." Pecolia never reproduced exactly a pattern seen in another quilt or in pattern books, or even the patterns learned from her mother. Every pattern Pecolia employed she modified, making each one wholly her own. Often she dreamed of new patterns, or created one drawing upon her experiences: "How I learned to piece up a Bird Trap - by the way my brother used to make them out of wood, and I'd get me some material and cut it out like he got it built out of wood."

Pecolia used color to personalize the most common patterns. She was very particular about her colors and used nearly a hundred different hues in her finest quilts. If she was making a quilt top and could not find a satisfactory color among her scraps, she would purchase material specifically for certain pieces. She placed colors with concern for contrast and movement, but never allowed her complex color arrangements to overwhelm a pattern. Instead, Pecolia's colors added another dimension to her quilts - while they reinforced her chosen pattern, simultaneously the interplay of lights and darks, brights and lows created an independent, optical effect.

cont on pg 13