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LILLIAN WALKER



## LILLIAN WALKER

by Joyce Gross

Several birds cut out, embroidered, edges turned under and basted by Mrs. Walker. After this stage, she would arrange and rearrange them on the quilt top. From the author's collection.

Material for this article was gathered from personal conversations with friends and relatives of Lillian Walker and her personal effects which were loaned to me by her friend Mrs. Ben (Lucile) Taylor. I am also grateful to Mrs. Taylor for the loan of the fine photographs which accompany this article.

Lucile and Ben Taylor of Fairfield, known throughout Iowa as quilt collectors and lecturers, were close friends of Lillian Walker. Until very recently they had only two of her works, a quilt Grandmother's Fancy and a basted quilt top Bird Lover's Guide which Mrs. Taylor is now appliqueing. In 1980 they had an opportunity to purchase The Little Brown Church in the Vale. Mrs. Taylor telephoned me to share the thrill. She said, "We are quite pleased with the quilting and finishing on the quilt, but sentimentally it is even more important to us because we watched Mrs. Walker work on it. Until today we had only the photograph (see cover) to remind us of the event. Now we have the quilt." Mr. and Mrs. Taylor used the photograph on their 1980 Christmas card.

Maxine Teele was a quilt teacher and lecturer from Iowa who met Mrs. Walker through the Taylors and took me to their home in 1976 to see some of Mrs. Walker's treasures. Mrs. Teele was an avid researcher and left a rich supply of articles, clippings and correspondence for documentation of the years 1950-1977. She was also a frequent contributor to NIMBLE NEEDLE TREASURES.

Lillian Walker was born in Middleton, Des Moines County, Iowa on Jan. 26, 1870. She lived to be 99 and died March 23, 1969 in Fairfield, Iowa. Her parents, Dicy Ann Free and James Albert Johnson had seven children - Lillian was the youngest in the family of five girls and two boys.

When Lillian graduated from 8th grade she left school to become an apprentice to a Miss Crawford, a seamstress in Burlington Iowa. She was so good that at the end of six months she was offered a position making "waists (blouses)" for the sum of \$2.25 per week - an offer she refused. Instead she chose to sew for many of the wealthy Burlington women.

In 1912 at the age of 42 Lillian married Clark Walker and they moved to Mediapolis where their son Wendall was born. When Clark died in 1924, she was faced with earning a living and raising a son.

Sometime in the 1920's Carlie Sexton of Wheaton, Ill, sponsored a contest for "the best photograph of a quilt displayed on a clothesline."\* Mrs. Walker entered and won the \$2 first prize and though as a child she had made fun of her mother's quilts, she now began to have serious ideas about quilts.

\*Photographs of quilts displayed on clothes-lines illustrated Mrs. Sexton's booklet OLD FASHIONED QUILTS, 1928, Wheaton, Ill which was republished by Barbara Bannister in 1964.

During a conversation with Mrs. Walker, Mrs. Taylor made notations in her copy of the booklet. Some of the pictured quilts were made or belonged to Mrs. Walker's friends and neighbors.

Spurred by the thought she might make a livelihood and still be at home with her son, she made samples of her applique pattern to exhibit at a quilt and rug show in Evanston, Ill. She received 15 orders immediately. The business continued to grow. At one time she had 10 women basting and 10 women quilting to keep up with the orders, but she screened the women's work carefully to insure quality.

At first quilts could be purchased in any stage - basted, appliqued, quilted or finished completely, but eventually she specialized in basted tops.

Among Mrs. Walker's possessions was a small ledger book in which she kept notes and the yardage required for the quilts. Some entries date back to 1930 and were for the McElwain shop. An item dated May 1933 told the story about Grandmother's Fancy. (The original quilt) 'was copied from a very old quilt which was made in the hills of southeastern Iowa. It is now in the possession of her only son, who is 75. It will soon go to the son and then on to the grandson. It has been wonderfully well preserved. In reproducing (the quilt) some changes have been made.' The changes may be the addition of birds, butterflies and the border flowers.

Grandmother's Fancy is also described and pictured in a 1936 Mary McElwain Quilt Shop catalog entitled THE ROMANCE OF THE VILLAGE QUILT. "This quilt was copied from a very old quilt which was made in the hills of Southeastern Iowa over 100 years ago. In the pioneer days, patterns and blending of colors were a problem. Every girl, when preparing for her wedding day, desired at least one quilt that was different in design from her friends. Polly's dream of a happy future was filled with all the beauties of nature. She spent months pondering how to weave birds and flowers into a quilt pattern - drawing, cutting and shaping flowers and birds. Finally a pleasant design was chosen. The exchange of pieces so common in those days, failed to give the colors desired, so the dye pot was called into action, and at last this lovely quilt was developed. Some way in the passing of this quilt through the generations, the name was lost, so (it) has been rechristened The Grandmother's Fancy.\*

"Colors of the quilt are: lavender, rose, blue, and yellow, old fashioned print flowers, canaries, cardinals and purple martins appliqued in plain colors. Eggshell background. Green binding and stemming. Full size about 84" x 108". Price: \$20. for the basted top and \$50. for the finished quilt."

A letter signed by Ruby Fahr of Carson, Pire, Scott, & Co. dated July 5, 1946 ordered 14 finished quilts and asked to be advised regarding the price of "finished tops." Upon receipt of the information the company would send an order for a quantity of them.

On an undated paper entitled "Worthwhile Quilts" is a price list of 10 different quilts basted. The price list varies from \$30 to \$65. Grandmother's Fancy was listed at \$30 and the Garden Bird Lover's Guide (which was not originated until after 1955), and Woodland Echoes were listed at \$65.

A lot of her quilting was done by a church group in Kentucky, but she also sent tops to be quilted in Missouri and Minnesota. Wendall Walker recalls that one-third of all the packages mailed in Mediapolis came from his mother.

For a time it looked as though Wendell would not be able to go to college because of lack of funds, but one of Mrs. Walker's wealthy customers from the North Shore of Chicago came to the rescue. Every September for four years she sent Wendell a check for \$500. His mother moved to Cedar Rapids so that he could save money by living at home while attending Coe College. He and his wife Fran live in Scarsdale, N.Y. and have two daughters and four grandchildren.

In 1935 Lillian Walker moved to Fairfield to be near a nephew and some of the women who worked for her, with whom she had become friends.

Her quilts were sold through Carson, Pire, Scott, & Co. and Marshall Field, two of the large department stores in Chicago, and Mary McElwain, one of the "best" quilt shops in the Midwest.

The Cape Cod Quilt Club, a business in Taunton, Mass advertised a machine-made quilt called Cheryl of a printed fabric of cherries and leaves. Mrs. Walker wrote to the company suggesting they should have a "real quilt". They agreed with her and she made them an applique. Another quilt of this design is in a private collection.

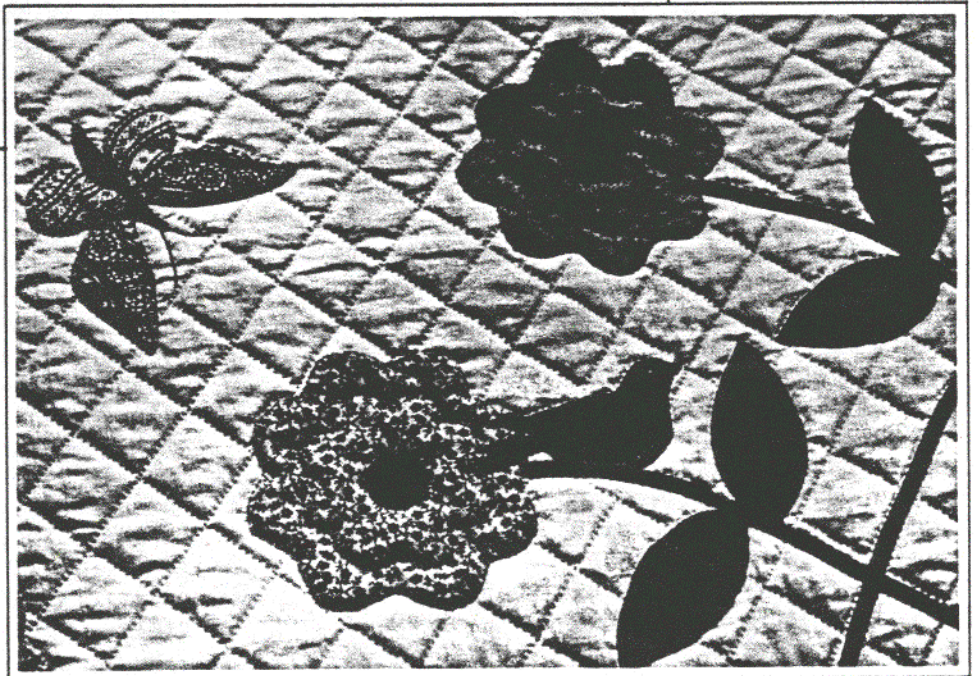
Mrs. Walker sold a Gone With a Wind quilt to someone in California. It had a house and street scene with a strong wind blowing the tree branches and smoke coming out of the house chimney.

*\*The original quilt was known to have belonged to a friend of Mrs. Walker as per her notation, so these additional details may have been added by someone else for "color".*



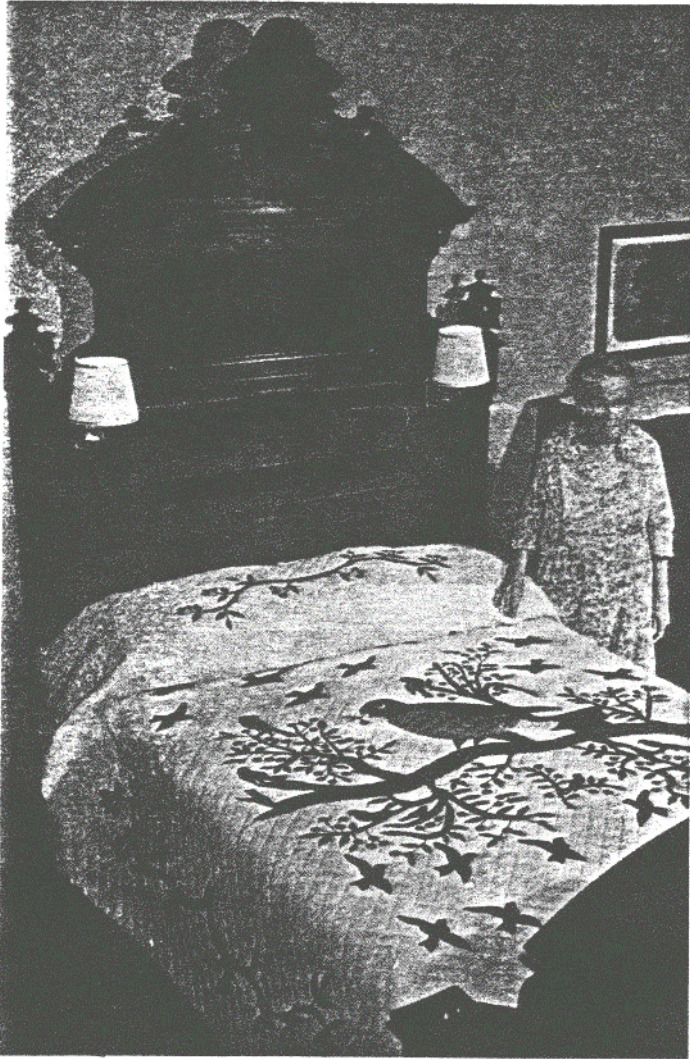
Top: Grandmother's Fancy.  
Owned by Ben & Lucile  
Taylor.

Right: Detail of Grand-  
mother's Fancy showing  
print flowers and  
butterfly.



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## LILLIAN WALKER



Lillian Walker stands beside a bed with her *Big Robin* quilt on it. The quilt is now in the collection of Harriet Berman. The picture was taken in the bedroom of the Ben Taylors.

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## HATFIELD-McCOY QUILT

In the Fall 1979 issue of the *JOURNAL*, Cuesta Benberry wrote an article about the Hatfield-McCoy quilt which is in the collection of the Ohio State Museum. The picture on the right is from *LIFE* May 22, 1944 which appeared in the article entitled "Life Visits the Hatfields - McCoys





Left) SPORTS ILLUSTRATED cover, slightly reduced. Bottom) Lucie Taylor's quilt top Bird Lover's Guide designed by Lillian Walker.

until it completely suited her and when she finished that portion she made a soft, clucking noise murmuring her approval of her work."

In an article in the Spring 1964 IOWAN entitled "Quilted Heirlooms for Tomorrow", Mrs Taylor noted, "After studying the pictures of the birds and tracing a few patterns, she had the ability to take a pair of scissors and cut the patterns sizes smaller or larger to make the individual birds."

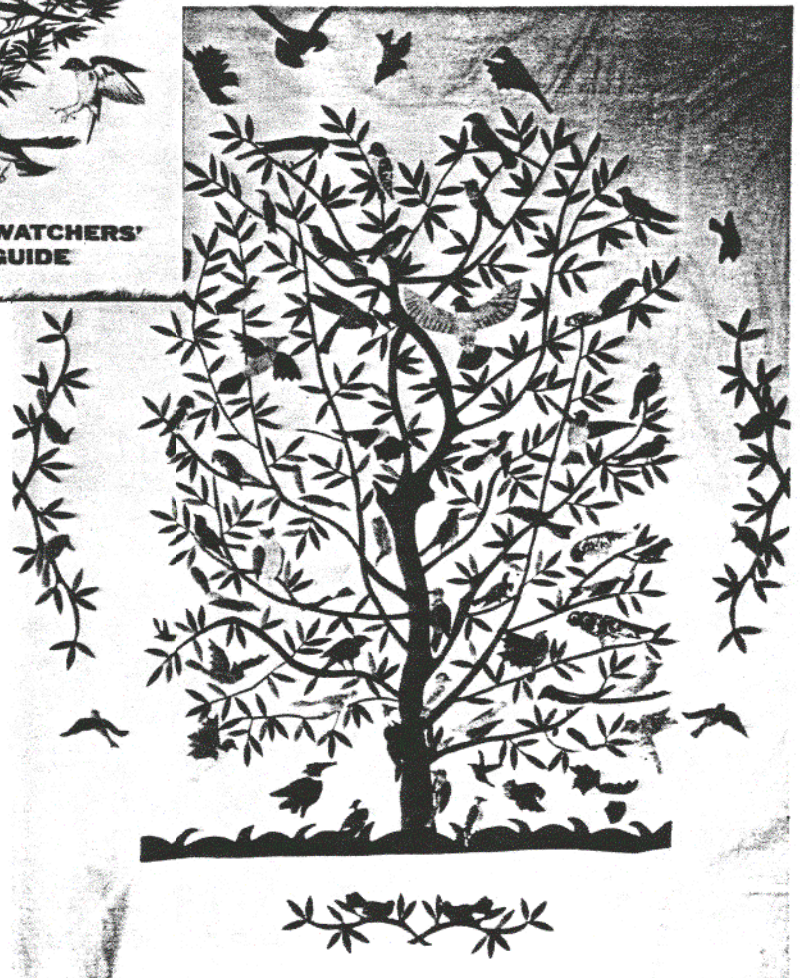
Maxine Teele wrote an article about Lillian Walker in NIMBLE NEEDLE TREASURES, Vol 6 #2-3, 1974, entitled "Something Worthwhile." She was all of five feet

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Lillian Walker's favorite pattern was Bird Lover's Guide based on the May 16, 1955 cover of SPORTS ILLUSTRATED. It showed 60 different birds all labeled and was done by Arthur Singer, a well-known painter and illustrator.

Her quilt incorporated 70 birds of which 60 were different. The birds were cut out, the beaks and eyes were embroidered, and the edges were turned under and basted. She made so many birds in her life it became almost automatic and she used to say, "I am sure I will be making birds in the Life hereafter."

Lucie Taylor, a close friend of Mrs. Walker's describes the procedure in the Sunday TIMES-DEMOCRAT of March 27, 1966, "She would arrange and rearrange every tiny piece



tall and would have weighed in at one hundred pounds soaking wet and with a flat iron in each pocket." Mrs Teele described their meeting, "I was introduced to this remarkable lady when she was well into her eighties. At once she began a campaign to convert me to applique quilts, for she was completely sold on the old idea that the appliqued quilt was the aristocrat of quiltdom and the pieced quilt the country cousin

On one occasion she returned a book of mine and inside I found a list of quilt names headed 'Worthwhile Names for Quilts' The list included Friends of the Forest Bird Lover's Guide The Garden Morning Warblers, My Old Kentucky Home etc. Did she leave the list in accidentally or was it a hint to get me going?"

"Another time she said 'Make something worthwhile. Make an appliqued quilt. I was perfectly happy with my pieced quilts, but when she offered me one of her patterns, I realized she was doing me a great honor... I inquired if she had a pattern for a small cherry tree and the birds to go on it."

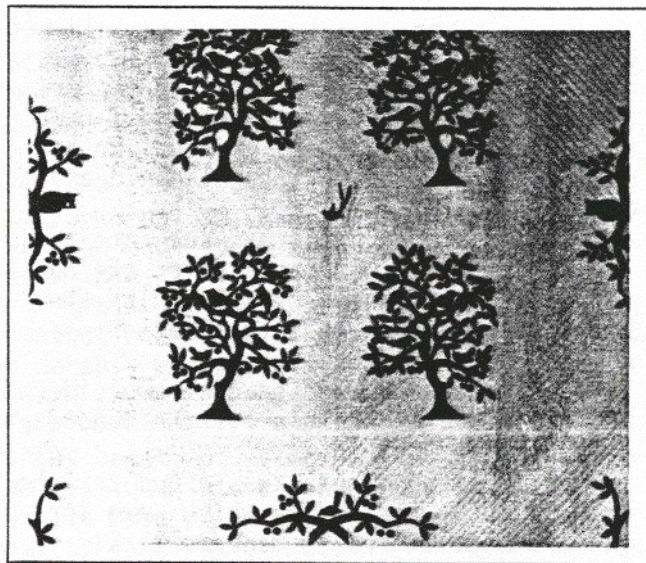
Mrs. Teele was to begin the quilt under Mrs. Walker's expert direction, but the Teeles moved 250 miles away before she cut a leaf. Sometime later the birth of a grandchild brought Mrs. Teele back to Fairfield and she showed the partially finished top to Mrs. Walker. "We spread it out before her and she looked it over as carefully as one could without benefit of a microscope. Finally she said, 'You have made something worthwhile'" On a later visit, Mrs. Walker welcomed Mrs Teele walked over to a quilt she was working on and unpinned something, came back and placed it in her hand, saying, "Here put this on your quilt. It doesn't belong on mine."

Mrs Teele followed orders and you will find the scissor-tailed fly catcher right in the middle of her Cherry Tree.

In 1966, three years before Mrs. Walker's death, Jean Pierson wrote an article for the Jan-Feb issue of KRAFTSMAN entitled "Quilts With a Personality". Miss Pierson was a neighbor of Lillian Walker and knew her well. "At 95 she still speaks with authority of her quilting and sparkles with animation in describing the patterns she liked best. She only retired from this work a year ago and even yet has ideas she would like to develop."

She quoted Mrs. Walker, "If you're going to make quilts - or anything; do something unusual and different, something no one else has done.

The SUNDAY TIMES - DEMOCRAT published an article on March 27, 1966 by Marilyn Lane



*Maxine Teele's Cherry Tree quilt.*

entitled, "Quilting's Grandma Moses". "Tho her hands are stilled by arthritis, the spunky little lady still said, 'I'd love to make another quilt, and I'd like to start this afternoon.' She has a list of 'Quilts I would still love to make' that she wrote some years ago, Under the Apple Tree Down by the Old Mill Stream Scenes of my Childhood Woodland Symphony and Where the Woodbine Twineth."

Mrs. Walker estimated she had designed over 100 quilts, though she acknowledged she was a poor bookkeeper and didn't know the exact number.

Early in life Mrs. Walker had had a kidney removed. When someone complained of feeling ill, she would retort that she had managed "to survive all these years with only one kidney." That usually silenced the visitor. She, like Bertha Stenge and Dr. Jeannette Throckmorton, was hard of hearing. She wore a hearing aid, but became increasingly deaf.

At 96 she still climbed stairs and made her own cotton dresses, though arthritis made it impossible to make any more quilts. She turned to pillow covers, using the same designs.

I can well imagine Lillian Walker is at this moment cutting out birds, embroidering their beaks and eyes, turning under the edges and basting them. Her eyes are sparkling and she is preparing to design another "worthwhile quilt"

*In another issue we will have an article about Mrs. Louis J. Berman of Whitehall, Michigan, who has a collection of Mrs. Walker's quilts.*

*See pg 8 for Bibliography*