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DOING RESEARCH - Part II

by Sally Garoutte

Sally Garoutte is the coordinator of the American Quilt Study Group and the former textile editor of the QUILTERS' JOURNAL. She is in the forefront of quilt research and has spent considerable time doing original research in the East and Mid-west. Her articles first appeared in the Spring 1978 issue of the QUILTERS' JOURNAL and continued until Fall 1979 when she did the article entitled, "Doing Research - Part I". We have had many requests for another article on research and are delighted Ms. Garoutte found time to write this article which we are sure many beginning researchers will find helpful. Last fall Ms. Garoutte coordinated and chaired the 1st meeting of the American Quilt Study Group held in Mill Valley. It was so successful she was unanimously elected Coordinator for the next meeting to be held October 23-25, 1981. For info about the group or meeting send a stamped self addressed envelope to 105 Molino Ave., Mill Valley, CA 94941.

Following the publication of Part I of "Doing Research", (on the question of why do it) inquiries have been received asking for a clearer definition of a "scholarly paper" and how it ties in with doing research on quilt history. I will try to answer that important question before going further in this series to discuss research procedures.

Simply put, a scholarly paper is the account of research that has been done by its author. Its distinguishing feature is that it is verifiable it states where and how its information was found, so that any other person can go and look at the same information.

The conclusions of a scholarly paper are the author's own and are always open to challenge. Another person, looking at the same information, may come to quite different conclusions or interpretations. However, no one may rightfully challenge the conclusions of a scholarly paper until she or he has gone over the same ground. It is not enough to say "that's wrong" -- one must have looked at the original information.

Therefore, a scholarly paper describes in detail how its information or data was come by. If certain information came from published books, those books must be listed and connected to the pertinent information by specific notes in the written paper. If some information comes from unpublished manuscripts in public or available collections, those notations must also be made. If some

information comes from verbal or "private" communications, that must also be noted.

An article or paper that does not state clearly where its facts came from is not scholarly. It is a story asking to be taken on faith. It is not verifiable. The reader can only hope that the author has searched factual material before writing her conclusions, as there is no way to check it.

Most articles in magazines of general circulation do not include scholarly notes (or citations). The author may in fact have done the scholarly research called for before claiming to be an authority on the subject. However, if she does not publish her work in a scholarly journal or in a book with scholarly notes and citations, her statements remain unverified theories. Many scholars do both: they write a scholarly paper to establish their grounds among other scholars, and then write one or more popular articles on the same subject for general circulation magazines. Scholarly papers are never purchased; the scholar gets "paid" by having her work published and available to other scholars. Popular articles are usually -- though not always -- paid for by the publisher.

As very little of the history of quilts has been a matter of record, many of us in quilt research will find ourselves having to rely on verbal communications or personal memoirs. This poses a problem. How can another person reasonably check the facts offered through verbal communication? Another person will not usually be able to interview the same people. In that situation, it is the obligation of the original researcher to keep detailed original records -- the tape recordings or original notes of interviews, original letters, photographs, and any other material coming directly from the informant. These should be clearly identified and dated. The same principle applies to personal collections of quilts, textiles or other artifacts that may be used for their original information. To be verifiable, careful records must be kept of where, when and how they were acquired. Good photographs should be made, in case the collection is later broken up.

It is unlikely that another person would seek to go over that original material, but it must be possible. The person most likely to use the material again is the original researcher, looking for still more clues. At some later date she may want to contribute her collection of original data to an appropriate repository.