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Panel: How I Do Research

At the 1987 AQSG Seminar four quilt researchers formed a panel to discuss their research methodologies. Virginia Gunn, Barbara Brackman, and Laurel Horton presented information on individual research strategies, while Joanna Smith addressed the use of computers to record and retrieve data generated by quilt research projects. These presentations demonstrate some of the many possible approaches to the study of quiltmaking and are intended to encourage others considering similar avenues of inquiry.

Library Research: Reflections and Advice

Virginia Gunn

I define research as the disciplined search for answers to questions. The first necessary ingredient is simple curiosity. While I have always been curious and have headed naturally to the encyclopedia or the library in an effort to learn more, I eventually, like most textiles/costume historians, began to ask questions not yet answered in secondary sources. I found that if I wanted to know the answers, I would have to dig deeper.

My own inclinations often lead me to ask questions about the nineteenth century, making library research necessary. Textile information is so widespread and the research base so underdeveloped that you can begin at your own doorstep until you have the time, money, and/or energy to travel half-way around the world. Local libraries or historical agencies usually have runs of regional or national magazines as well as census records and early newspapers. City offices have such items as city and county records and estate inventories. Think creatively about all the primary sources that might be available within a few miles of your home.

Most quilt history researchers are women. They usually develop their own survival strategies to work research around other activities

and constraints in their busy lives. When my two children were very small, I asked questions that could be answered using the local newspapers at the public library near home. I eventually completed a study on nineteenth-century photography and costume in Wayne County, Ohio. I could run over to the library after the boys were tucked in bed, leaving my husband in charge of the fort, and work two hours on the microfilm reader before closing time. Once involved in my intriguing project, I took my four-year-old to the library story-hour and then found I could work an hour longer at the microfilm reader with him on my lap if I let him push the button to make copies fairly often.

My children eventually learned to entertain themselves in a library. However, when I identify an article as potentially useful, I still quit reading it immediately and photocopy it, a habit I picked up when library time was at a premium. Then I work through the article later, comfortably ensconced at home on the sofa or at my desk with a cup of coffee handy. Experience has shown that I usually err by not copying something that looked only marginally useful to my current topic rather than by copying too much. When I compared the cost of photocopying to the cost and hassle of acquiring a sitter, I decided that copy costs were a great bargain. (Note: Be sure to see if the article you are copying is continued in a back section, or you will find yourself needing another trip to the library to finish the story.)

When I go through old newspapers, periodicals, and books I try to do it rather thoroughly. I do not rely heavily on indexes, for I have found that information I find wonderful was seldom considered important enough to index. I collect information for projects other than the one that brought me to the library that day. If interested in a time period, one is almost always fascinated by more than one aspect of it. I have found it profitable to keep several topics on the back burner and collect information for all at one time.

Many early primary sources have now been transferred to microfilm. People have different tolerance levels when working with microfilm readers. When you notice your attention wandering as you work through great material, or when you begin to move the pages faster than you can read, you have probably reached your limit and need to stop and return later. One lasts longer on a reader with

adjustable print size, with a screen that reveals a large section of the paper at one time placed at a correct level for your eyes, and with a conveniently-placed movement control that can go both very slow and reasonably fast. Unfortunately, many microfilm readers lack these desirable features. I ask for a printer/reader because I like to print as I go rather than moving to a separate printer. Be sure to ask the librarian for help if the first copy is not clear. These machines are temperamental. Also be sure to label each copy with correct source, date, page information or you will be in trouble when you begin to write your footnotes later.

At home I work through the information I have collected and mount articles on standard typing paper to be stored in three-ring notebooks on my bookshelves. In the top right-hand corner of the paper I list the source, date, and page number of each article. I underline key passages I want to find quickly and make notes, comments, and questions in the margins. I file the articles chronologically by date, for that is the way I remember things best. I will remember that something appeared in a lady's magazine in the early 1880s, for example. I then go to that section and can usually locate what I want fairly rapidly. By having data filed in notebooks, I can easily remove pages that I want to use in a particular project. I can sort them into different categories and then refile them by date again when I am finished. People remember things differently, so all must form their own categories for retrieval. No system is foolproof or perfect. Do what works best for you.

Eventually, the material I am working through close to home is missing something I need, and this leads me to sources not available locally. I use interlibrary loan and computer search systems, such as the OCLC (Online Computer Library Center trade-mark), that allow me to locate nearby libraries and agencies that contain needed documents. I keep a list of things I want to look up when I have a day to travel elsewhere or when a family trip or meeting takes me near a library or society that has the material I need. It may be weeks or even years before I can conveniently get there. Quilt researchers are very nice about looking up a bit of information for one another, but you cannot expect someone to look through five years of an obscure farm periodical for you.

Historians need to sift through most material for themselves. Teams of researchers are of little help. Besides, searching is the fun part. Like anything worthwhile, there is work involved and you do get tired and often dirty (dusty old books!), but the rewards of the search are exhilarating to those who like this type of thing. Eventually, some researchers begin to think of library archives in distant cities as wonderful vacation sites! They search for places nearby that would be of interest to their family members.

Library research often sends the searcher back to the outside world in the quest to have all questions answered. For example, my study of nineteenth-century costume and photographers began in the local library but eventually led me to flea markets, antique shows and shops, the state historical society, and private homes. Finding answers to one question usually raises new questions.

We need to remember too that the joy of discovery is only half the battle. Once the data is collected we have to carefully synthesize, organize, and analyze it. Then we have to let the information talk to us and tell us what it will. Finally we must work to write up our conclusions to share with others. The writing will probably take less time than the gathering process, but it may seem at least twice as hard. The rewards of recovering quilt history include the wonderful friends you make and share with along your research path. That path begins with your first curiosity and continues until the answers to your questions form a particular piece of historical writing for others to criticize, enjoy, and build on.

Research on Quilt Patterns and Style
Barbara Brackman

One of the obvious questions about quilt patterns is "What is this pattern called?" My major interest from 1970 until 1984 or so was to record the names of pieced quilt patterns. My initial task was to develop a cross-reference list among all the easily accessible quilt books, the half dozen or so classics from the first half of the twentieth century like Finley, Hall, and McKim and the dozens and dozens of books published in the 1970s. My initial task (like Judy Rehmel, Yvonne Khin and Jinny Beyer who were doing the same things at the

same time) was to develop a system for classifying the patterns by design and then to give each design a number so it could be found, even if one didn't know any names for the pattern. In my system a basic **Nine Patch** is 1601, a **Chimney Sweep** is 3265.

I realized after a year or two that the books I was indexing were in themselves indexes to earlier published sources. Most of the writers had obtained pattern names from earlier, more obscure sources, particularly from periodicals, such as farm magazines, women's magazines, and newspapers so I began going directly to the earlier sources. I found by reading whole runs of such periodicals that those published in the years 1890–1900 and 1925–1940 were most likely to contain quilt patterns, and that regional farm magazines were an excellent source for pattern names that often never appeared in a later source. Magazines like *Orange Judd Farmer* and *Wallace's Farmer* at the turn of the century and *Dakota Farmer* and *Oklahoma Farmer and Stockman* in the 1920s published many unique patterns and/or names. A few of these magazines are still printing, but most had fairly short runs and left few traces.

I do not know of a reference that lists all the regional farm magazines published in the United States, although the *Agricultural Index*, which indexes farm magazines by subject each year, and the *Union List of Serials*, which is an index to periodicals held by U.S. libraries, list large numbers of them. I initially made an index card on every agricultural magazine in both these sources and set out to examine them for quilt patterns. I have not yet met that goal and probably never will. Finding library holdings for complete runs of the magazines is difficult. The best bet is the libraries of agricultural colleges in the region, which usually have the original magazines in the stacks, so reading microfilms is not necessary, which I consider a plus since reading microfilm gives me motion-sickness. However, the fact that few are microfilmed means that borrowing films through interlibrary loan is not feasible, so it's necessary to find a library with the actual periodicals.

When I travel I schedule time in libraries that might have agricultural periodicals, and I usually begin by examining the list of holdings at the periodical desk. I often find farm magazines which are not in my list obtained from the *Union List of Serials* and the

Agricultural Index, giving me some insight into the limitations of those sources. I then leaf through the magazines, pinpointing the turn-of-the-century and Depression decades because if a magazine is going to have any significant number of quilt patterns they will usually have them in those decades. The quilt patterns generally appear in the housewife's section of the farm magazines and in the needlework sections of the ladies' magazines. My method has been to copy the pieced patterns in chronological order and take notes on names, sources and any stories connected with the design. I later add new names to my index card for each pattern, and make new index cards for novel designs. I rarely photocopy since I haven't room to store the photocopies.

At some point in the early 1980s I realized I would not get this task done, and the value of finding yet one more name for pattern #2138 began to seem of less importance than the fact that much of what I was reading about the ages of the patterns seemed to be inaccurate.

I then switched my question from "What is the name of the pattern?" to "How old is the pattern?" Reading about patterns was not telling me how old the patterns were. Since the published information only began in the 1890s and the quilts were obviously older than that I decided to look at the quilts. I began a new line of indexing, first going through the books I'd indexed a decade earlier but looking this time at photographs of actual quilts, and cross-referencing the design according to age. I published the initial results in *Uncoverings 1983*, a list of the pieced patterns I found in quilts attributed to the years between 1750 and 1825.

I soon realized that using attributed dates was not a good idea, since so many were innacurately attributed. I had seen so many quilts that I began to get a "feeling" that a date was wrong, based on the style of the quilt. I decided that I would take a new line, indexing only quilts that actually had the date inscribed on them, and, besides looking at pattern I would look at the more elusive qualities of style—color scheme, block arrangement, fabric scale, and technique—to see if I could be more objective in my "feelings" about style. Referencing any one item on more than one point meant "megathousands" of index cards, but fortunately they had invented the personal computer by this point so I painfully taught myself to use DBase II and began a data base

of date-inscribed quilts made before 1950. I find pictures of these quilts in books and magazines, and I see the actual quilts in museum collections, quilt shows, and antique shops. I index each quilt on about twenty different style, pattern, or maker characteristics. For example, I have a list of nineteen color schemes. A red and white quilt is coded "c" under the color scheme category. I now have about 700 quilts in the data base and can list them chronogically on any parameter, thus getting an idea of when red and white quilts were popular, or when chintz borders or quilts with the schoolhouse design (#864) were made. I have found that about five to ten per cent of any collection of quilts will be date-inscribed; therefore I could expect to look at 7,000 to 14,000 quilts to find 700 with the dates inscribed.

Seven hundred quilts is enough to draw many preliminary conclusions about how style characteristics have changed, but we will soon have information on a much larger sample of date-inscribed quilts when the data from the various state quilt projects become available for researchers. They are gathering far more information than a single individual could hope to do. Now I am waiting for the projects to organize their data bases and I hope I can get access to their lists of date-inscribed quilts and their slides (or, if I wait long enough—their laser disks). It may be that in a few years I can enter data on 5,000 date-inscribed quilts and get a far clearer picture of how style and pattern in quilts has developed.

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Local History Research and Folklore Fieldwork

Laurel Horton

My approach to research comes from a combination of my two fields of graduate study, library science and folklore. The former training has given me research skills in written records, and the latter defines the subjects which I study, helps me maintain humanistic insights, and provides me with a different set of research skills.

I examine quilts as material objects of human culture. I search them for characteristics that reveal clues about circumstances of their creation and their creators. These include physical properties such as thickness of batting, the presence or absence of machine sewing, physical size, and types of fibers and fabrics; and also aesthetic properties such as pattern and color choice, arrangement of design ele-

ments, and the level of needlework skill. The sum of these descriptive parts provides information about such things as the intended function of particular quilt, the economic circumstances of the maker's family, and aesthetics of the maker's community.

In my research I often focus on a group of quilts that share certain characteristics. For instance, I often look at quilts made in a particular region or compare two groups of quilts from different places or made by different ethnic groups. It is not enough for me just to identify the regional characteristics of quilts or to describe the ways the quilts differ; I want to know why and how these distinct traditions came to be. In exploring the quilts of a particular region I start asking questions: What was the context within which these quilts were made and used? What groups of people first settled the region? When did they arrive? Where did they come from? What were the textile traditions in their former home? What cultural influences did they experience? What fabrics were available to them, and which ones did they choose for their quilts? What was the economic and agricultural base of the area? Where were the centers of trade and manufacture?

I confess that as a youthful student I was bored by history. I have not taken a course in American history since sleeping through one in high school. Asking questions about quilts, however, has awakened a hunger that causes me now to devour historical materials in search of tidbits that will increase my understanding of such subjects as women's lives, household and commercial textile manufacture, and commercial trade routes. I usually start with general regional histories of an area then try to find more local materials, either in published or manuscript form. Archival research, which usually involves searching sparsely indexed primary materials such as letters and diaries, is painstaking and time-consuming, but the rewards are gratifying. A single diary entry, such as "Today I bought calico for my tulip quilt," can be trusted to be accurate for that writer in a particular time and place. Such information is much more valuable than a sweeping generalization in a history book, such as "Early settlers grew or made everything they needed."

One of the goals of my library research is to examine generalizations and stereotypes and test them against actual historical findings. My research since 1976 has focused on the Southern Appalachian

mountain region and the South in general. Negative stereotypes abound for both areas which cloud a much more complicated and compelling reality.

I end up doing a lot of reading that has little or nothing to do with quilts. Most published history books focus on famous men and political events, but I look most closely at chapters that describe geography, early settlement, agriculture and commerce, and social life and customs. Over time the growing interest in women's history and social history is providing more information about the lives and concerns of everyday people, including women and their quilts.

It's unlikely that I would find historical records that mention a particular surviving quilt. Instead, I find evidence that helps me recreate the context of the place and time in which the quilt was created. The picture I draw may not be complete, but I know the few lines that I have reconstructed are accurately placed. Additional research, mine or by others, can fill out the sketch.

Because so much of American quilt information is not found in libraries and archives, I also conduct what folkklorists call "field research." Others might call it "going out and talking to people," and they express envy for a job that encourages this sort of activity.

The basic premise behind folklore fieldwork is that there exists a body of information, shared by a group of people such as a family or community. Much of this information is not recorded in written sources; it exists in oral tradition or in the form of customs practiced by the members of the group. The information is passed along from one person to another, such as from mother to daughter, or by observation, as a child watches an adult making biscuits, milking a cow, or making quilts.

Folklorists begin with an idea of the kind of traditional information they wish to collect, for instance, traditional names for quilting designs, then they identify the subjects, sometimes called "informants," who are likely to have this knowledge, in this case, quilters who have learned to quilt from family or community. Folklorists use the oral interview as a primary research tool.* By asking the right questions folklorists learn not only specific facts, but also the value system of the subject's community. For example, a researcher might document not only the existence of the **Rose of Sharon** pattern, but

also the fact that it was traditional as a wedding quilt.

Folklorists try to avoid letting their own preconceptions get in the way of the information they seek. The phrasing of questions can be crucial. For instance, a popular quilting design in southern quilts consists of a series of concentric arcs. Some quilters call this "fan" quilting, others know it as "shell" or "elbow" quilting. To learn the local name for the technique, the folklorist might point to an example or draw a picture, and ask "What do you call this type of quilting?" This question may elicit only the local name for the technique, but it may also bring forth a discussion of when the technique is appropriate and from whom is was learned. A less-skilled interviewer who asked, "Do you ever do 'fan' quilting?" might get a very different response.

Folklorists assume that there may be more than one "right" answer to a question. We are less concerned with identifying the "correct" name for a particular pattern than learning the variant names actually used by quiltmakers.

Quilt research can take so many different forms that no one person can adequately explore all of them. I rely on the work of other researchers for information on other regions, on pattern development, and on specific needlework techniques. I try to stay current with new research and cite those references in my writing rather than to unnecessarily retrace their research trails. American quiltmaking and related traditions form such a broad and complex area of study that even dozens of serious researchers will not soon provide answers to all the questions. The nature of the subject of quilts and quiltmakers is such that any researcher anywhere can focus on the quiltmaking traditions of her own area and, with care, compile results that are specific, accurate, and important as pieces of the larger picture.

*See Laurel Horton, "The Oral Interview in Quilt Research" Technical Guide #2 (San Francisco, Calif.: American Quilt Study Group, 1988).

The Role of the Computer in Quilt Documentation Projects

Joanna Smith

The 1970s witnessed two important developments that have put quilt researchers in an historically unique position. First, the quilting revival of the 1970s, centering around the American Bicentennial, kindled a new interest in old quilts that had been tucked away in closets and attics. At the same time, technological advances in computer development meant that computers were no longer restricted to corporate or academic environments. While computers grew more powerful,their physical size and price tags shrank, making them more widely available.

The renewed interest in quilts continues and has lead to many state and regional quilt documentation projects that are collecting large bodies of quilt information. Thousands of quilts have been brought out of closets and attics to be studied, documented, and photographed. Of these thousands, a few will appear in shows and in books. The vast majority, after their brief appearances, will probably be returned to their storage spaces and will remain as they were before the wave of quilt documentation passed through their communities. Picturing one of those quilts in its drawer or box, one would think that nothing had changed. But things have changed dramatically, because we now have descriptive information which we never had before about those thousands of quilts. The North Carolina Quilt Project alone has collected data and slides of 10,000 quilts.

This is a tremendous amount of information. It can be easily stored on note cards or sheets of paper, but finding it again is another matter. As the amount of data grows so does the difficulty in finding it. At some point, note cards and paper become untenable as means of storing and recalling large bodies of information. Around that same point, computers emerge as efficient mechanisms for storing and retrieving those same large bodies of data. So we need to think about how we can use computers to our advantage.

The first question we need to ask is "When should we start thinking about putting our data in the computer?" The answer is, "You should know what data will be entered in the computer before you

hold your first quilt documentation day." This point is very important and bears repeating. Decisions about computerizing data should be made when the documentation form is designed. Information cannot be retrieved from the computer if it was not recorded when the quilt was documented. For example, in order to perform a computer search for any quilts that were made with feed sacks, the documentation form must have provided a place where that information was recorded.

The need to think about computerized data so early in a project is also apparent when one considers the multiple functions the documentation form serves. First, it is the primary data collection instrument. It is the form the volunteers will use to record the quilt information. It should elicit the information precisely and without ambiguity, and it should be easy to use by volunteers who have no experience in data collection. It should be designed so that the same information is recorded regardless of who records it. For example, when a quilt's colors are recorded, the documentor will select from a predetermined and finite list of colors rather than rely on her own color vocabulary. If a quilt is green it will be recorded as "green" rather than "jade" or "emerald" or "avocado."

Secondly, it can be the form from which the data entry personnel will enter the data into the computer. If the documentation form is designed with foresight, it may be possible to enter the quilt information into the computer directly from the form. However, the information must be recorded exactly as it will be entered. This is done by precoding the form.

There are excellent examples of precoded forms all around us; registration forms, appliance warranty cards, and charge account applications are good examples. Any form that provides small boxes for the letters of names and addresses or for multiple choices has been designed so that the data can be entered into the computer directly from the form. Study these from a design perspective and think about how their designs can be incorporated into a quilt documentation form. Collect forms and advice from other quilt projects; learn from their mistakes.

Not only will our forms improve with experience but they will acquire some degree of standardization, which is a very important consideration. The best advice I ever received on designing forms was,

"Don't design them. Buy or steal them."

If the quilt documentation phase of a project has been completed using uncoded documentation forms, the information may be prepared for data entry by abstracting information from the documentation forms onto coding forms. The data can then be entered from the coding forms. This is the approach the North Carolina project has taken.

Project coders transcribe items such as the quilt identification number, the quiltmaker's first, middle, maiden, and last names into boxes, one letter or character per box. Wherever possible, items are categorized. For example, batting can be classified as one of the following: cotton, wool, polyester, a blanket, another quilt, none, other, and unknown. Next to each category is the code that will be entered into the computer: C for cotton, W for wool, P for polyester, etc. The coder circles the appropriate code and the code is entered in the computer. When the computer retrieves the information, it will translate the one character code back into English first.

There are some guidelines to follow when coding the data. As a rule, a blank should not be used as a valid code. Subsequently, it is important that the categories for an item be exhaustive, allowing for all possible responses. That is why the three categories "other," "none," and "unknown" are included.

The "other" category provides a code for the occasional odd batting material that is inevitably reported. If the quilt has no batting, that fact should be recorded rather than leaving the item blank. If batting was not recorded on the documentation form, then "unknown" should be coded rather than leaving it blank. If the coder neglects to circle the batting code, the result is a blank. Without the "other," "none," and "unknown" categories, a blank could mean (1) the batting was a material that could not be categorized or (2) the quilt had no batting or (3) the quilt might have had batting but it wasn't recorded by the documentor or (4) the quilt had batting and that information was recorded by the documentor but the coder failed to transcribe. it. The net result is a meaningless code. Therefore, a blank should not be used as a valid code.

Many decisions must be made when information is transcribed to the coding forms. Those decisions should be made by the coders

according to rules they have agreed upon so that the same decision will be made regardless of who makes it. The persons who key the data into the computer should not make any decisions. They should enter exactly what is on the coding form and not make any changes. This guarantees that a correct decision will not be subsequently changed. It is also easier to standardize the decision-making if it is restricted to a defined group.

It is important that there be a free-flowing exchange of information among documentation projects. That information includes not only the quilt data that is being collected but also the methodological lessons that we have learned along the way. For example, documentors often express the date a quilt was made as a range of years: 1880s, circa 1880, or 1880–1900. However, the date field of a data base will only accept a four-digit year. The North Carolina project was seeking a solution when Laurel Horton of the South Carolina project suggested a system that she had seen used by the Allen Textile Collection at the University of Wisconsin: record two date fields, the earliest possible and latest possible. This is an excellent solution for quilt dates that can only be estimated, and an excellent example of the sharing of such solutions among the many groups working on similar projects. We will all benefit from such collaboration.