

Uncoverings 2005

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The Threads of a Friendship: Lillian Walker, Maxine Teele and Lucile Taylor

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Lucile and Ben Taylor filled their two-story brick house in Fairfield, Iowa, with numerous collections and saved letters, photographs, and clippings on many subjects. After their deaths, the ephemera that Lucile assembled pertaining to quilts and the two special friends who shared her interest in the subject came into the author's possession. This study surveys the Taylor archives to uncover information about how Lillian Walker, Maxine Teele and Lucile Taylor influenced each other's quilt activities after the late 1950s. This primary material reveals the conditions quilters faced prior to the flowering of the current revival in the 1970s, the on-going quilt activity in southeast Iowa that bridged the two revivals of the twentieth century, and the details of a mutually beneficial three-way friendship that brought public recognition to Walker late in her life and produced two new quilt experts who contributed to the contemporary quilting scene on regional and national levels.

In 1955, Lucile Taylor needed to give a last minute program for a mother-daughter banquet at the Pleasant Grove Church near Fairfield, Iowa. In desperation, she called Maxine Teele, the wife of the local Methodist Church minister who had just moved to town, and asked her to help "cook something up."¹ Maxine agreed to bring along eight quilts she had acquired over the years. Lucile read a couple of poems, recalled memories



of her mother's quilting, and reported on the history of quilts and the names of patterns based on information in Marie Webster's book, *Quilts, Their Story and How to Make Them*.²

Twenty-two years later, Lucile wrote that in 1955, Maxine "had just gotten started in quilts—had only made one for her family."³ Mrs. Taylor, who by 1977 had become a southeast Iowa quilt expert and collector, gave credit in her own popular programs to that first collaboration for changing the lives of both women. "[Maxine] has gone on to become a professional at both making [quilts] and giving quilt talks. Along the way our interest led us to Mrs. Lillian Walker."⁴ She added that Lillian Walker's "knowledge and interest . . . led me to pursue deeper and deeper into the fun and heritage [of quilts] that is our today."⁵

In 1959, Lucile and her husband Ben met Lillian Walker, a professional quilter who had been living in Fairfield almost a quarter of a century. The Taylors then brought Mrs. Walker and Maxine Teele together. For the next ten years until Mrs. Walker's death in 1969, the three women shared a mutually fruitful relationship fueled by their interest in quilts. In the 1960s Lucile Taylor and Maxine Teele blossomed into quilt experts in Iowa, and in the 1970s the latter contributed on the national scene until her death in 1977. Cuesta Benberry wrote in tribute, ". . . I count my quilt experience and my life richer for having known Maxine Teele. She was a major talent in the mid 20th Century American quilt world. . . ."⁶

Lillian Walker, a product of the heyday of quilting in the 1920s and 1930s, persisted with her appliqué business through the 1940s and 1950s while the national media was paying less attention to the craft. In the 1960s, she influenced the quilt careers of Teele and Taylor who participated in the rising tide of interest that broke into a flood of popular awareness of quilts resulting from the exhibit at the Whitney Museum of Art in New York in 1971. At the same time, the approach of the 1976 American Bicentennial stimulated new research into the history of quilts. The second revival of the twentieth century did not just begin all at once in 1971, however. It had roots in regions such as southeast Iowa where people like Maxine Teele and Lucile Taylor capitalized on an on-going rich quilting heritage and prepared the way for new converts by contributing to quilt exhibits, programs, lectures, classes, articles, and guilds.



Lucile, an inveterate collector of ephemera as well as quilts, saved her own notes, clippings, correspondence, photographs and records, and also acquired many papers and patterns that had belonged to Lillian Walker. An archive of Taylor-Walker materials in the author's possession provides most of the documentation for this paper and reveals many insights into the experiences of quilters between the two quilt revivals of the twentieth century, as well as the stories of three special women.

Lillian Walker's Story

Lillian Walker had been a professional quiltmaker for over three decades when she met Taylor and Teele in 1959. Although almost ninety years old, Mrs. Walker was still busy basting quilt tops, coming up with new ideas for original folk-art style designs, searching for someone to sell her patterns, and trying to market her work. She impressed her new friends with her skills and knowledge of quilts. In fact, she knew a lot of quilt history first-hand, having provided Carlie Sexton of Des Moines, Iowa, with material about 19th century quilts for her magazine articles, booklets, and pattern repertoire in the mid-1920s.⁷ Carlie Sexton, in turn, was instrumental in Walker's decision, at age fifty-five, to make and sell quilts after the death of her husband.

Lillian Walker was born January 26, 1870, near Middletown, Des Moines County, in southeast Iowa, the sixth of seven children born to James Albert and Dicy Ann Feese Johnson. There, and later at Mt. Union in the next county to the west, the family farmed and Dicy Ann made quilts. After graduating from eighth grade, Lilly, as she was known as a child, attended a dressmaking school in Burlington on the Mississippi River. Following completion of the six-month course, she sewed for many families in Des Moines County.⁸ On September 4, 1912, she married Clark Walker, a widowed farmer with seven children, the youngest about 16 or 17 years old. One of his granddaughters described Lillian as a cute, tiny little lady, a real go-getter, and added, "She was always making jelly. They said she could make jelly out of a fence post."⁹ Clark and Lillian moved to Mediapolis, Iowa, where a son, Wendell, was born the following year on August 15, 1913, when Lillian was forty-three years old. Eleven years later, her husband died after an illness of several months.¹⁰



In the early 1920s, Lillian had ordered a pattern for a pieced quilt featured in one of Carlie Sexton's first magazine articles.¹¹ Although Lillian Walker never made another pieced quilt, this contact with Sexton began a long connection between the two business-minded women. According to Walker, about the time of her husband's death in 1924, she won a \$2.00 prize offered by Sexton for the best photograph of a quilt on a clothesline.¹² Such a contest was a tried and true method for obtaining new material for publication at *People's Popular Monthly* where Sexton had worked for many years as head of the clerical staff before she left to start her own writing and pattern publishing business. She probably announced the contest to the members of the mailing list she compiled as orders came in for patterns.

In 1924, Carlie Sexton published her third book, *Old Fashioned Quilts*, illustrated with many pictures of quilts hanging on a clothesline. All but one showed her previously published quilts. Cherry Tree, the only new quilt on a line, may have been Walker's photograph. A picture of a group of women quilting around a frame in an outdoors setting definitely came from her camera. Walker later told Lucile Taylor these were the "Presbyterian ladies at Kossuth," a town just a couple of miles from Mediapolis.¹³

Although Carlie Sexton did most of the photography for her books and articles, some evidence indicates that Walker may have taken the pictures of the nineteenth century quilts owned by her friends and relatives that appeared in Sexton's publications after 1926. Walker kept in her files a photograph of a quilt folded over a line which Carlie had inscribed on the back: "This is just to show you position I would like."¹⁴

Lillian credited the \$2.00 prize and the publication of her photo for awakening an interest in quilts, although as a child she had laughed at her mother's patchwork. She decided to make and sell only appliquéd quilts, mostly from designs current at the time, to earn money for Wendell's education. Since she lived in a fairly isolated location, she depended on the U. S. mail to receive orders and deliver products. Early success came after she sent samples of her work to a quilt and rug show in Evanston, Illinois, and had to hire ten basters and ten quilters to fill the resulting orders for fifteen quilts.¹⁵ Carlie Sexton, who lived in Evanston from 1925 to 1927, probably sent the information about the show to her friend.



In 1930, Lillian Walker moved to Cedar Rapids in order to provide a home for her son while he attended Coe College there. Her quilting put him through school. After Wendell graduated, she moved to Fairfield to be near relatives and some of the women who worked for her. Like her friend, Carlie, she created a scrapbook of pictures of quilts and patterns which she could use as a reference to show clients.¹⁶ If the designs then in vogue were copyrighted, she “enter[ed] into lengthy correspondence for permission to use or reproduce these patterns to make her quilts.”¹⁷ In 1935, she wrote to *Better Homes & Gardens* asking for the pattern of the *First Lady* quilt advertised in the November issue as a kit, which actually was being supplied by Ruby McKim. Someone called “Doris Hale” replied that the large and complicated pattern was normally not available. “However,” she added, “we will make an exception in your case and furnish these stamped from our Master Pattern onto paper so you can copy them at 75¢ for the complete set and include the instruction chart.”¹⁸

Many orders for quilts came to Lillian Walker through the Mary McElwain quilt shop, a well-known business in Walworth, Wisconsin, with national and international customers.¹⁹ In fact, one of Walker’s designs, *Grandmother’s Fancy*, appeared in the shop’s catalog. On August 20, of an undisclosed year, Mary McElwain wrote that she needed two twin size quilts of this large overall design for a customer who wanted to see a basted sample before Labor Day! A sketch on the back of the page indicated the customer’s ideas for placement of colors, although final decisions were left to Walker, as long as she used the red and green fabrics supplied by the customer (see Figure 1).²⁰ Other quilts from Lillian’s hands for the Wisconsin shop were “Emery Basket . . . using part of Dogwood,” “Horn of Plenty,” “Lil [Lib] Smith 1840 [Rose of 1840],” and “Rose in 3 shades . . .”²¹ Many times she reproduced *Indiana Wreath*, a quilt featured by McElwain and used with permission from Marie Webster who had published it as the frontispiece of her 1915 book, *Quilts, Their Story and How to Make Them*.²²

Walker also said she made quilts for Marie Webster whose Practical Patchwork Company in Marion, Indiana, sold patterns, kits and finished quilts of her revolutionary early twentieth century appliqué designs. Lillian saved numerous pages from Webster’s catalogs, some with a price



Figure 1. Lillian Walker adapted a design from an old quilt for her *Grandmother's Fancy* pattern. She sold basted and finished examples through Mary McElwain's catalog. Lucile Taylor purchased this top, photographed in 1961, from Lillian Walker and hired the Ball sisters in Fairfield, Iowa, to quilt it. Photograph from the Ben and Lucile Taylor Papers.

hand-written at the top that might be her fee for basting a top. No further evidence of a direct Walker-Webster connection has been found in the Taylor files or in Rosalind Perry's files of her grandmother's business.²³ Nevertheless, Walker did reproduce many of Webster's designs. Some of the patterns stayed in her files, and notations on clippings of Webster quilts appear in her scrapbook.

In 1936, Walker entered a quilt of her own design in the Women's Pageant of Progress show in Chicago. An article in *The Prairie Farmer* magazine described that quilt from Iowa as an original design called *Baskets of Forget-me-nots* made by Lillian Walker and attributed her



entry into quilting to the publication of her quilt photographs in “magazines.”²⁴

Walker reported that she sold her quilts to or through Marshall Field and Co. and Carson Pirie Scott & Co. in Chicago.²⁵ Documentation in the Taylor files reveals only some transactions with the latter. On July 5, 1945, the linens department at Carson’s ordered fourteen finished quilts and promised to order tops as soon as Walker notified them of the price. The store also planned to send more material to her whenever it became available. Five months later on December 22, Ruby Fahr who represented the store sent Mrs. Walker a check for \$135 for her *Flower Garden* quilt which “will be one of the prize pieces of our quilt collection. The design is lovely and I am sure your choice of colors has made it even more attractive.”²⁶ The *Flower Garden* title of the quilt is misleading. Actually the pattern was the famous *Garden*, based perhaps on Pine Eisfeller’s winning entry in the 1942 National Needlework Contest sponsored by *Woman’s Day* and published in the magazine in 1943.²⁷ In 1946 Walker sold a basted top of *The Garden* to a customer whose daughter described it as a “Copy of ‘The Garden’ pictured in Ruth Finley’s ‘Old Patchwork Quilts.’ Considered to be the finest design in appliqué quilts.”²⁸

Although Lillian Walker did not keep many business records over the years, she did make a list of some of her regular customers. Her best patrons were Mrs. Warde Chittenden, who bought sixteen quilts, and Mrs. Chittenden’s daughter, Mrs. Henry Pierson.²⁹ The older woman finished at least two basted tops, which afterward were considered as her own work. In a 1965 exhibit, Mrs. Pierson entered two quilts “made” by her mother—*The Garden* described above and *The Indiana Wreath*—an “authentic copy of the quilt in Marie Webster’s ‘Quilts.’”³⁰ Mrs. Pierson also had two entries of “original modern design by Mrs. Lillian Walker of Fairfield, Iowa.”³¹ They were *Bird Lover’s Guide*, which marked a change in her style, and *Woodland Echoes*, a folk art representation of an imaginary scene.

The cover of the May 16, 1955, *Sports Illustrated* called “Bird Watchers’ Guide,” inspired Walker to write to the editor who gave her permission to use the design and supplied “an enlargement of the cover to work from.”³² With the picture as a guide, she carefully chose suitable fabrics for wings and tails, delineated the eyes, and captured realistic poses for



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Figure 2. Lillian Walker works on her *Lily Pool* quilt while one of her basted *Bird Lover's Guide* tops hangs on the wall behind her. The photograph from the Ben and Lucile Taylor Papers was published in the *Fairfield Daily Ledger* on March 26, 1959, and is reprinted with permission.



sixty species which she placed in one large tree (see Figure 2). The birds became her trademark and showed up in many of her creations of primitive landscapes filled with plants, animals, trees, and buildings.

In seeking new outlets for her quilts in the 1950s, Lillian Walker wrote to the Chambers of Commerce of cities, mostly in the mid-west, asking for the names of gift shops. She then wrote to stores with names that she thought might carry items for the home. An early inquiry to Philadelphia must have asked for the names of antiques shops. The reply envelope dated June 19, 1950, contained pages removed from the telephone book. Six years later, she penciled a rough draft and wrote to several of the dealers, proposing to sell her reproduction of an antique quilt, probably *Grandmother's Fancy*. "I make it in unbleached muslin & and that add[s] to the old attic look . . . I have been in quilt work for many years, but of corse [sic] I make very modern quilts for quilt shops."³³

A price list of the quilts in her late repertoire of basted tops titled "Worthwhile Quilts" included:

The Garden	\$65.00
Bird Lover's Guide	65.00
Woodland Echoes	65.00
Lily Pool	40.00
Indiana Wreath	40.00
Four Cherry Trees	40.00
Robins in the Cherries	40.00
Magnolia Tree	40.00
Cherry Tree	40.00
Grandmother's Fancy	30.00

Although Lillian Walker may not have kept business records, she did clip and save many pictures of birds, trees, and scenes for inspiration and pattern guides. Some of her last bed-size creations were *Scenes of My Childhood*, *Old Homestead*, *Little Brown Church*, and *Friends of the Forest* (see Figure 3). Most were one of a kind, although *Bird Lover's Guide* was repeated nine times.³⁴ She also made lists of titles for new ideas that were always floating around in her mind, such as *Dawn's Awakening*, *Down by the Old Millstream*, *Where the Woodbine Twineth*, *The Way Side Inn*, and *In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree*.³⁵



In the 1950s, Lillian Walker also began to search for a publisher for her original patterns. After reading about Florence Peto's quilt exhibit at Dearborn, Michigan, in April 1955, Lillian decided to contact the national expert for help. In her reply, Peto could only think of Stearns and Foster as a possibility.³⁶ Years later, Ben and Lucile Taylor continued to contact personalities in the quilt world as they searched for a publisher for their friend's bird designs.

Maxine Teele's Quilt Career in Relation to Lillian Walker and Lucile Taylor

Maxine Choulet was born November 24, 1914 in Warsaw, Illinois. At age 21, she married Henry Teele on December 23, 1935. Twenty years later he became the pastor of the United Methodist Church in Fairfield, Iowa, where Lucile and Ben Taylor were members of the congregation. Between the collaboration with Lucile on the mother-daughter program in 1955 and making the acquaintance of Lillian Walker in 1959, Maxine became an accomplished maker of pieced quilts.³⁷ In a magazine article she later described her encounters with Lillian Walker.

She was all of five feet tall and would have weighed in at one hundred pounds soaking wet and with a flat iron in each pocket. Yet in that tiny frame there dwelled an unquenchable spirit, a bright wit, and a wide-ranging imagination. . . . I was introduced to the remarkable lady when she was well into her eighties. At once she began a campaign to convert me to appliqué quilts, for she was completely sold on the old idea that the appliqué quilt was the aristocrat of quiltdom . . .³⁸

After hearing Lillian's repeated admonition to "make something worthwhile. Make an appliquéd quilt," Maxine remembered the *Cherry Tree* quilt in the Art Institute of Chicago. "I inquired if she had a pattern for a small cherry tree. In short order, I had patterns for the tree and birds to go on it."³⁹

Mrs. Walker's sharing of a letter she had received from Florence Peto proved to be just as crucial to Maxine as the advice about appliqué. Wanting information about a technique she was trying, as well as how to



Figure 3. *The Old Homestead* quilt appliquéd by Lillian Walker and quilted by Mrs. Mary Jay, left, and Noble Ball, right, otherwise known as the “Ball sisters” of Fairfield, Iowa, photographed in 1961. Photograph from the Ben and Lucile Taylor Papers.

stitch patches of fabric basted over paper, Teele wrote to the New Jersey quilt authority in December 1959.⁴⁰ Florence Peto’s reply thirteen days later gave Maxine access to the highest rank of the quilt world, most of which occurred by way of the U.S. mail, although the Teeles did go east in 1963 to meet Peto at her home.⁴¹ Peto even sold some of her antique fabrics to Maxine who adopted her practice of using them to make new quilts.

The quest for the name of the pattern Maxine had been working on in 1959, which involved a technique of folding a large square of fab-



ric several times, required several years of letter writing to a variety of sources. She contacted Purdue University, thought at the time to know the origin of the pattern. In an exchange of letters with Virginia Herrick, a pattern collector in Cherokee, Iowa, they more or less decided Attic Windows was the correct name, although what Teele christened her “pain in the neck” quilt is what we now recognize as Cathedral Window.⁴²

Two items in the Taylor papers provide further insight into the Walker-Teele connection. A full color picture on the front page of the Sunday *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* “Pictures” section for April 5, 1959, showed Gypsy Rose Lee with several show-business friends stitching crazy quilts. An attached note says: “came from Maxine Teele to Lillian Walker in 1959.” Always eager to uncover a good quilt story, Teele apparently wrote to the celebrity and sent her newspaper clippings about Lillian Walker’s work. Lee replied on June 2, 1959: “As you say, Mrs. Walker’s quilt is really a work of art.”⁴³

In 1960, before Maxine could start her *Cherry Tree* quilt from Lillian Walker’s pattern, Reverend Teele was appointed Superintendent of the Council Bluffs district and the family moved to western Iowa. Later, on a visit back in Fairfield, Maxine showed her appliqué work in progress to Lillian Walker who placed one of her trademark birds at the center of the four-block layout of trees.

After the Teeles’ departure from Fairfield, Maxine and Lucile maintained their friendship by correspondence. Fortunately, some of Maxine’s letters written between 1964 and 1966 have survived. They contain delightfully witty writing that chronicled her progress as a quilter, speaker and Midwest quilt expert. On May 5, 1964, Teele gave a quilt program after which a member of the audience loaned her an antique block to copy. When she could not find the pattern in books she again “sent off a sketch to Virginia Herrick of Cherokee.” She then described some redecorating of the parsonage and hoped “the artist on South Main [Ben Taylor] would approve.” Teele concluded: “You needn’t thank me for the interest in quilts. I’m always tickled pink to make a convert!”⁴⁴ A clipping dated April 14, 1964, probably accompanied this letter. The Council Bluffs *Nonpareil* photograph showed Mrs. Henry J. Teele hold-



ing a Drunkard's Path quilt on top of her Cherry Tree quilt. The caption announced an upcoming program about her collection of antique quilts at a coffee at the Broadway Methodist Church.

An undated letter for Lucile's birthday on August 21, probably written in 1964, involved a story Maxine had learned about a quilt "given to Queen Mary's mother which had been made by Queen Victoria and other ladies of the royal household[.]"⁴⁵ She continued:

I took my courage and pen in hand and wrote Queen Elizabeth . . . and asked her if it was still in existence. I now have a letter from Buckingham Palace—not from the queen, from her assistant press secretary. Did you even know she had a press secretary—neither did I. Anyhow no one seems to know anything about the quilt. . . . I am now casting about for ideas to write the White House and I think I have it. Let you know the results if and when there are any.⁴⁶

Maxine also reported that her Irish Chain "is lots of fun, but still a very gaudy quilt." She planned to appliqué "more or less" Irish symbols between the pieced blocks.⁴⁷

A letter written on March 12, 1965, indicated the rapid rate she produced quilts, all made by hand.

Needlework here goes on apace—I always did want to use that phrase tho I am not entirely sure what it means—I finally got courage enough to quilt the Double Irish chain—it is still very, very loud and I sometimes doubt the vision of the gal who first picked out the colors (me) but it is better on the bed than I dared hope for. Since this is St. Pat's month I have it on the bed—it was on for a meeting here Tuesday when all the gals wondered if I had one for each month of the year? Well, how about that?

The Hawaiian quilt is quilted too and it also is handsome on the bed. I now have "October Outing" almost ready to quilt but since the subject of the pair is so definitely calendar related I may wait awhile to quilt it. Already have cut out a Meadow Lily quilt—the lady from the Denver Museum said all museums should have a lily quilt—I don't class 120 [the address of her home] as a museum but still I've wanted a lily



Figure 4. Maxine Teele with her *September Song* quilt. A similar quilt called *October Outing* completed the pair. Photograph from the Ben and Lucile Taylor Papers.

quilt and this does give me my excuse. Colors, pink (mostly left over from Denise's Pink Puzzle) and a very soft green (left over from a quilt for Henry [see Figure 4]).⁴⁸

On August 10, 1965, she relayed some news from Florence Peto: “—she has the grandest sense of humor. She had helped the reporter who did the Time [NY Times] story on the quilts in the Newark Museum—says she: ‘he didn’t know a quilt from a jack rabbit.’” Maxine also apologized for not knowing that Lucile wanted a copy of Ruth Finley’s book. “I did locate a copy thru Barbara Bannister—but she wanted ten or twelve bucks. I decided that for that I could use the one in the library. I can hear Ben snort. However, if I had known you were on the search I most



certainly would have sent the notice to you.” She also described her ideas for another quilt:

The new quilt is not hexagon strictly speaking—it is on hex signs, inspired by a story Mary Jo sent to me from the Chevy magazine on a certain Johnny Ott from Penna who used to paint these. Hope to show it to you sometime. It is still in the designing stage. The meadow Lily is nearly done and the results satisfying! I don’t mean nearly quilted—that comes in the future but don’t ask when.⁴⁹

A month later, Maxine enclosed a letter and photo from Florence Peto along with her own letter to Fairfield and the news that she had

sent her [Peto] my check for \$15 for the quilt top she mentions and some of the old fabrics—I saw the ones she had made up into quilts and they were fascinating tho the toiles did not appeal to me as much as they do to her. I liked the calicoes and chintzes better. Well, of course toile is chintz but I mean I like the scenic less well than the florals. . . . Addition to Item One—the fabrics and quilt Peto refers to are the Necktie blocks which you and Ben saw when here last fall. I did set it together with unbleached muslin after discarding many, many other ideas. Mrs. Peto told me afterwards I should have used homespun. My, my.⁵⁰

In an undated letter written on a Tuesday, Teele lamented: “The old fabric quilt threatens to throw me—I get out my fabrics, think of correlating them and the ideas I did have skitter away—unsuitable!” Furthermore, she was perturbed by an article in the newspaper.

My name appeared in the local press as part of a Speaker’s Bureau on the history of quilts—I had not seen it until today when someone teased me about it. This has been organized by the Chamber of Commerce and I am at a loss to explain it—no one approached me and I would have been flummoxed had some one called me and said: ‘I see where, etc.’ Well, let us see what comes of it before conference—I have three quilt talks already for churches and surely, surely most of the CB [Council Bluffs] district has had enuf of me by now.⁵¹



The Teeles moved back to eastern Iowa in the summer of 1969. Reverend Teele served the Muscatine Methodist Church until the summer of 1973 when he became pastor of the Trinity United Methodist and Lyons United Methodist churches in Clinton, Iowa. Although no letters from Maxine are in the Taylor files after 1966, Lucile kept several newspaper clippings about her friend's quilt-related activities. The Muscatine paper in March 1970 included Teele's recipe for "Broccoli supreme" in an article titled "Woman of many talents likes to cook." The subject of the feature added in handwritten notes: "I did not say this" with an arrow pointing to the word "likes" in the headline and "No!" written next to the phrase "likes to cook" in the text. Most of the article described her many interests besides quilts. For the photograph she wore a dress with diamonds pieced into the yoke and sat at the kitchen table while stitching on "her latest project . . . a quilt with a patriotic design in red, white and blue using old materials including hand loomed linen." Maxine added a notation: "The quilt is done & quilted & I like result."⁵²

In May 1973, the Clinton, Iowa, paper had a long article focused on Maxine's quilt work and the reasons for some of the names of her quilts. The "'blue-green wonder' title came about because, she said, "it was a wonder that the quilt was ever finished. Actually, the quilt took me nearly five years to complete from the time I started my search for the fabric, because the greens have always been hard to find." In *Pineapple Surprise*, the pineapples were surprised by being surrounded by a strawberry border. Two "tree of life" quilts included many symbols, such as a blue bird for happiness, or on a more personal level, a jack in the pulpit for her husband's work. The accompanying picture showed Maxine wearing a jumper made from drapery fabrics, holding a skirt of double knit squares, and standing with her quilts: *October Outing*—a large cornucopia basket filled with fall foliage, the finished patriotic quilt renamed *Presidential* quilt and *Pineapple Surprise*.⁵³

Having made about fifty quilts for family and friends, many of her own design, she was more than qualified to teach beginning and advanced classes at the Clinton YWCA. And with her curiosity, engaging writing style, and accumulated experiences, she became a regular contributor to *Nimble Needle Treasures* in 1973. Her subjects included a tribute to



Florence Peto's generous sharing of encouragement, information and antique fabrics, two quilt shows at the Clinton YWCA, her friendship with Lillian Walker, and the Iowa quilter, Dr. Jeannette Throckmorton.

The *Des Moines Sunday Register* gave Maxine Teele statewide recognition by featuring her in the April 6, 1975, magazine section. By this time her total production of quilts had reached sixty. She commented: "Quilting pleases me. . . . This is my "thing." I like putting myself into something that will last longer than I will." She faced an audience just beginning to be exposed to quilts as the revival of the 1970s was gaining steam. To readers unfamiliar with the joys of quilting, Teele described it as "a functional art form," useful, beautiful, and creatively satisfying, and added: "Quilts often have the added charm of having a story to tell—in scraps of material that recall family memories of home-made dresses; in embroidered sentiments or special-occasion patches" (see Figure 5).

A terrible irony of the *Des Moines Register* article titled "Her legacy: quilts," was her focus on the future as her husband contemplated retirement. She looked forward to a productive future putting the ideas in her head into fabric for many years to come. The article concluded: "Comes the time when she can't take it with her, she'll leave the world a prettier place—with all those hand-made quilts."⁵⁴ Maxine Teele died less than two years later on March 18, 1977. The NQA's Eighth Annual Quilt Show held in Washington, D.C. the following summer included a memorial exhibit of sixteen examples of Teele's legacy. A special show edition of the group's publication paid tribute to Maxine as one of "a small group of individuals from different parts of the country who bridged the span from this generation's quilt enthusiasts to earlier writers and quilt conservators."⁵⁵ Lucile Taylor wrote of her friend:

I met her first in the '50's when she came to Fairfield as the wife of our new minister. She was so effervescent and enthusiastic about all her hobbies. She had just gotten started in quilts—had only made one for her family. Her thing then was post cards and Christmas cards. Our mutual interest in quilts developed in later years. . . .⁵⁶



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Figure 5. On April 6, 1975, the *Des Moines Register* featured Maxine Teele with her Flower Pot and Presidential quilts in the Sunday magazine section. Photograph by Frank Folwell, copyright 1975, The Des Moines Register and Tribune Company. Reprinted with permission.



Lucile Taylor and Lillian Walker

Just a few months less than forty years of age separated Lucile and Lillian who first met in 1959 when the older woman was eighty-nine years old. Lucile Vandevort was born on August 21, 1909, in the tiny town of Wapello, not far from the Mississippi River which forms the southeastern border of Iowa. Her mother saved scraps from sewing dresses for five girls and stitched them into “plain, ordinary quilts”—her only relaxation while raising a family.⁵⁷ Her grandmother also quilted and did “mending and quilting until the day of her death. She lived to be 88.”⁵⁸ Lucile, however, did not learn to quilt. She had “outside chores and [was] interested in other things.”⁵⁹

Lucile attended Iowa Wesleyan College in nearby Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, and prepared for secretarial work at Fort Madison Business College. On July 29, 1939, she married Benjamin J. Taylor in Des Moines, Iowa, and moved to Fairfield, Iowa, her husband’s hometown.⁶⁰ Ben Taylor, a graduate of Parsons College, was the third generation of his family to work for the *Fairfield Daily Ledger*, then edited by his father. Having studied art, he gravitated to the advertising department. Due to hard times, many people in the area were selling antiques at auction. “Whenever you handled a bill for advertising, you had to go to the auction and collect the bill before they spent the money, so I saw a lot of stuff selling dirt cheap. . . . That’s how we got to start collecting quilts. They’d go for \$2 or \$3, but they just had to sell them.”⁶¹

Ben and Lucile inherited family antiques and interests in local and regional history. Nothing in the area escaped their attention. In 1952, they bought an old two-story brick house on Main Street three blocks from the town square. After renovating it, they used Ben’s drawing of the facade on their stationery and filled the rooms with their collections. Ben focused on Lincoln memorabilia, other presidential and political material, Native American artifacts, and Fairfield advertising items, among many other things. Ben Taylor, “Man of the Year,” “Lion of the Year,” Chamber of Commerce president, and long-time Library Board president, remained involved in church, genealogy, and preservation throughout his life. Lucile, a member of the local PEO chapter, Questers, Genealogy Society, Fairfield Women’s Club, and housing boards, also served her church in many local and regional offices.⁶² In addition to



collecting quilts, Lucile studied and acquired coverlets, especially those woven in Fairfield by Daniel Stephenson. In 1971, she sold her second and third best examples of his work to the Art Institute of Chicago.⁶³

In March 1959, the Taylors were probably the moving force behind getting some publicity for Lillian Walker in the *Fairfield Daily Ledger*. A front-page feature, including a picture of Mrs. Walker and her bird quilt, appeared with the headline “Fairfield’s ‘Grandma Moses’ Wins Acclaim For Quilt Designing Art.”⁶⁴ So impressed were the Taylors with their new friend, they devoted a paragraph about “Fairfield’s ‘Grandma Moses’” in their next Christmas newsletter and included a photograph of her with her Bird Quilt. Lucile also announced that she was starting a bird quilt with Walker’s help.⁶⁵

Ben and Lucile admitted that Walker could be difficult to deal with at times. Nevertheless, the Taylors admired her abilities and achievements and tried to help her in whatever way they could. Hoping to fulfill Walker’s wish to have her original patterns published, they visited Carlie Sexton in Wheaton, Illinois, in the early 1960s, just when she was disposing of the last of her inventory to Barbara Bannister and was not interested in, or even physically capable of, engaging in the quilt business again.⁶⁶

To further spread the word about her friend, Lucile wrote the *Iowan* magazine on January 9, 1964 asking if a story about Mrs. Walker would be of interest. Five weeks later Lucile sent in her manuscript, several black and white photos, and a color picture taken by a professional photographer of Mrs. Walker standing next to a grand old bed in the Taylors’ spare bedroom (see Figure 6).⁶⁷

Preparing the article for publication was a new experience for Lucile—a challenge compounded by the arrival of Mrs. Walker’s son and daughter-in-law for a Sunday dinner to celebrate Lillian’s 94th birthday on January 26. The rare visit to Iowa by Wendell Walker, who lived in Scarsdale, New York, and owned a management-consulting firm in New York City, merited the headline “Visit Here For New York Couple” over the article about the birthday event that the Taylors submitted to the newspaper.⁶⁸

Since the older woman had difficulty answering the letters she received as a result of the media publicity, Lucile typed up responses with the explanation that Mrs. Walker “is very timid about writing to



Figure 6. Lillian Walker next to her *Robins in the Cherries* quilt after the Ball sisters had finished the quilting, ca. January 1964. The antique furniture at the Taylor's house provided an excellent setting for photographing quilts. The photograph from the Ben and Lucile Taylor Papers was published in *Quilters' Journal*, Spring 1981, and is reprinted with permission.



strangers,” and in her best secretarial manner, made and saved carbon copies.⁶⁹ Some of the letter writers congratulated the quilt artist for her achievements. Others had questions for the expert, or shared their own quilt-related experiences with a kindred spirit, or told of the problems they faced getting patterns and materials. One in Berkeley, California, felt inspired by the *Iowan* article to try designing her own quilt but, she wrote, “I find it difficult to find the backing, etc. The materials all seem to come in kits, which seems [sic] too expensive. Have you any suggestions of places I might write or go for materials?”⁷⁰ Several asked if Walker’s designs were for sale.

In early 1966, *The Craftsman* magazine published a feature about Lillian Walker written by Jean Pierson.⁷¹ Jean, a feature writer and photographer for the Kraft Foods Company in Chicago, just happened to be the daughter of the Taylors’ next-door neighbors on South Main Street.⁷² Ben and Lucile had a direct hand in supplying information and once again contributed a story for the *Fairfield Daily Ledger* promoting the local connection to the author and her subject.⁷³

Jean’s two-page layout included five black and white illustrations of Walker’s handwork. In one photograph, the ninety-six-year-old “Grandma Moses of Quilting” sat in front of her folk-art style *Little Brown Church* quilt top. Another picture showed her most recent version of *Grandmother’s Fancy* which she had basted and sold to Lucile who hired the Ball Sisters of Fairfield to do the quilting.⁷⁴ Walker’s final basted top for a *Bird Lover’s Guide*, several separate basted birds, and a small tree filled with birds for a pillow or picture frame clearly showed her handwork. According to the author, Mrs. Walker’s philosophy was to “do something unusual and different. . . . She says she played her ‘lucky card’ when she began using birds for no one else had designed and used them in quite that way.”

More accolades came her way in March 1966 when the “Focus on Family” section of the *Sunday Times-Democrat* of Davenport, Iowa, ran a large color photograph of Mrs. Walker next to her *Old Homestead* quilt on the cover and a two-page feature inside. Underlying the upbeat praise of Walker’s life and designs was the fact that arthritis had caused her to give up stitching quilts three years earlier, although she continued



Figure 7. Lillian Walker made up many birds in advance as complete units and then placed them on small trees after arthritis made it difficult for her to stitch the full size quilt tops. Photograph from the Ben and Lucile Taylor Papers.



to make twenty-six pairs of pillow covers before finally retiring in 1965 (see Figure 7).⁷⁵

After being in a nursing home for several years, Lillian Walker died on March 23, 1969, slightly less than two months past her ninety-ninth birthday. The Taylors helped with the various funeral arrangements, for which they received letters of appreciation from Wendell Walker. In a carbon copy of one of Lucile's replies, she thanked the son "for all the gifts of your Mother's things. As she treasured them and had joy in caring for them, we will long remember all she did for us in the short years we had the privilege of knowing her."⁷⁶

Lucile Taylor's Quilt Education, Programs, and Collection

In 1959, the same year that the Taylors met Lillian Walker, Lucile wanted to get a copy of *Old Patchwork Quilts and the Women Who Made Them* by Ruth Finley. The New York Book Shoppe replied to her inquiry that as a result of ads placed in "antiquarian journals" for the out-of-print book, one copy was available for \$12.50 and another for \$10.00.⁷⁷ On a Publishers Central Bureau order form dated August 1960, Lucile ordered two copies of *Romance of the Patchwork Quilt* for \$2.98 each. Having already used Marie Webster's book for her first program in 1955, she had three of the small handful of quilt books published up to that time. In the summer of 1970, Maxine Teele recommended *Quilters Newsletter*, a new quilt magazine that had been in existence only a few months, to her friends in Fairfield.⁷⁸

Lucile followed her mentor's example of keeping a scrapbook of pictures of quilts from magazines in the 1960s. Instead of accumulating patterns and design ideas, however, she looked for accounts of quilters, quilt exhibits, and old quilts in Iowa newspapers. As the number of articles on these topics increased through the 1970s, she slipped the loose clippings between the pages of a recycled greeting card catalog. During the 1980s, she added catalogs from several quilt shows in Iowa to her files.

After Lucile's initial 1955 program for the mother-daughter banquet, her next documented public quilt-related event occurred in 1963. The local newspaper announced that the Taylor home featuring a collection



Figure 8. Lucile Taylor with a coverlet woven by Daniel Stephenson in Fairfield in 1868. Her prized Whig Rose quilt on the bed and others in the room were on display during a home tour for the benefit the Fairfield Women's Club's. The photograph from the Ben and Lucile Taylor Papers was published in the *Fairfield Daily Ledger* on February 13, 1963, and is reprinted with permission.

of quilts and coverlets would be open for a Valentine's Day fund-raiser for the Fairfield Women's club (see Figure 8).⁷⁹ A year later her article about Lillian Walker was published in *The Iowan* magazine.

When Lucile gave a program on quilts and coverlets for the Brighton Study Club on November 17, 1967, she cited the three books mentioned previously plus Florence Peto's two books, Eliza Calvert Hall's *Aunt Jane of Kentucky*, and Averil Colby's *Patchwork Quilts* for expanding her understanding of the history of quilts. By this time she had accumulated



more quilts along with bits of their history. On May 20, 1961, she had paid \$6.50 for a ca.1860 quilt with red and white pieced baskets filled with appliquéd flowers at the Carter family sale in Libertyville, Iowa. Mrs. Tobe Bontrager, an Amish quilter, had finished an old Whig Rose top for her.⁸⁰ Lucile herself had just finished a crazy quilt owned by her mother-in-law and stored for many years in the Taylors' attic. She also had her *Grandmother's Fancy* appliquéd by Lillian Walker in 1958 and quilted by the Ball sisters in Fairfield.

In February 1970, the Taylors loaned eight of their favorite quilts to the Art Center of Cedar Rapids for its "American Quilt Exhibit" which took place a year and a half before the Holstein/van der Hoof quilts appeared at the Whitney Museum in New York. In addition to the Crazy Quilt, *Grandmother's Fancy*, and Whig Rose already mentioned, their English Ivy, Ornate Star, Old Log Cabin, Flower Basket, and Ocean Wave quilts, each valued at \$200, joined twenty-one other examples at the show, including Maxine Teele's *Material Pleasures* and *Star Materials*, both made with antique fabrics. Mrs. Teele was also the featured quilt historian who spoke about patchwork quilts at a public lecture at the Art Center.⁸¹

On February 4, 1974, Ben and Lucile gave a program titled "Treasurers Today; Trifles Yesterday" for the P.E.O. chapter of Bonaparte, Iowa. They "displayed their collection of coverlets and quilts, explaining the different patterns and methods of putting them together."⁸² On March 19, 1974, the *Fairfield Daily Ledger* again photographed Lucile with her quilts and coverlets, this time at a meeting of the local D. A. R. chapter. The lengthy article highlighted the history that Lucile had uncovered about the pieces in her collection.⁸³ On September 14, 1974, she participated in three sessions of a quilt seminar at the Conger House Museum in Washington, Iowa, where she discussed her collection and answered questions.⁸⁴

The 1976 Bicentennial celebration fostered more interest in quilts and their history. Between November 1975, and October 1976, Lucile spoke to eight women's groups in southeast Iowa. Two years later the P.E.O. in Bedford, Iowa, invited Lucile and Ben to their 75th anniversary celebration. "They delighted the audience with history, wit and humor," reported the *Bedford Times Press* for April 27, 1978. The newspaper pho-



tographed the couple holding up their nineteenth century basket quilt with appliquéd flowers.

At a quilt show at Mt. Zion, Iowa, in September 1981, the Taylors proudly exhibited a recent acquisition—the newly finished *Little Brown Church in the Vale* quilt designed sixteen years earlier by Lillian Walker—and related the story of the roundabout way it had come into their possession⁸⁵ Mrs. Walker had been photographed with the top in 1965 before she gave it to a niece. It was later found inside a comforter bought at an auction, quilted, and sold to a friend of the Taylors who purchased it for their collection.⁸⁶

Lucile's records show only three programs given in the 1980s. On January 16, 1985, she presented a blue and white quilt in a Millwheel or Snow Ball pattern to the McElhinny House, the headquarters of the Fairfield Women's Club. Although the maker was unknown, the quilt had been used in the house by the McElhinny family until they moved to California early in the twentieth century. Dorothea Spielman, a niece of Carrie McElhinny Spielman, had given the quilt to the Taylors who took custody until the club had the resources to care for it (see Figure 9).⁸⁷

Figure 9. Lucile Taylor presented a McElhinny family quilt to the Fairfield Women's Club, owner of the former McElhinny House, on January 16, 1985. Photograph from the Ben and Lucile Taylor Papers.



Another opportunity to promote quilts as art came about in December 1985, in Fairfield. A new Institute for Creative Arts, including studios for artists, classrooms, and gallery space, opened with an exhibit of quilts made by three local women, one made by Sara Miller of Kalona, Iowa, and four antique examples from Ben and Lucile Taylor.⁸⁸ Also, by this time a local quilt guild, Prairie Quilters, had organized in Fairfield. Lucile joined it, as well as the Iowa Quilters Guild, and became the liaison between the two.

From the mid 1980s through the 1990s, the Taylors sold surplus quilts and coverlets, most for less than one hundred dollars, at consignment auctions in southeast Iowa. While reducing their collection a few pieces at a time, they still kept track of current values and market activity by making hand-written lists of all the items sold, the selling price and the number of the buyer.⁸⁹ Lucile also sold tops, stacks of quilt blocks, and old fabric to friends who had an interest in such things.

Lucile died unexpectedly on September 9, 1994, at the age of 85. Ben continued to sort through her quilt related items and papers and tried to distribute them to people who would use and preserve them. He died July 16, 1999. The following February, a two-day auction disposed of the Taylors' furniture, collections, and collectibles which filled the local National Guard Armory Building.

Lucile's warm personality, friendly smile, and helpful nature drew people to her immediately. She had the good fortune to meet two women, Maxine Teele and Lillian Walker, who helped give her context and meaning for the quilts she had bought at auctions. In getting public attention for Lillian Walker through print media and club programs in an area that already appreciated quilters, Lucile acquired a reputation as an expert on the subject. More quilts and their stories came her way so that as interest in quilts increased in the 1970s, she had better examples to show her audiences and contribute to art exhibits. Although not really a quiltmaker, she participated in, and added to, the growing quilt scene in Iowa. Her collecting, writing, speaking, spirit, and friendships connected quilters in her area for three decades.

Lucile Taylor's penchant for keeping records and saving papers—her own and those of Lillian Walker—created a valuable archive of the years preceding the current revival which are generally thought of a low point



in American quilt history. The Taylor files reveal how quilting continued through the 1950s and 1960s, especially in southeast Iowa. They also show how quilters kept in touch at that time and the difficulties they faced in getting information, patterns, and supplies. Most of all, they contain details about how Maxine Teele and Lucile Taylor emerged as new quilt experts in the 1960s and 1970s, influenced significantly by Lillian Walker and her years of experience designing, making, and selling appliquéd quilts since the 1920s. Lucile's papers form an important link between the quilt revival of the 1920s and 1930s and the ongoing national interest in the craft and business of quilting that began in the 1970s.

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9. Wanda Lane, telephone interview with author, May 2, 1995.
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11. Taylor, "Quilted Heirlooms of Tomorrow," 34
12. *Ibid.*, 33–34.
13. Carlie Sexton autographed a copy of her book, *Old Fashioned Quilts* (1928), for Mrs. Walker in 1961. Walker then wrote down the names of the women next to the picture; author's collection. Walker also identified pictures for



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- Lucile Taylor who wrote down the information in her own copy of *Old Fashioned Quilts*; information from Joyce Gross.
14. Photo in author's collection.
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 16. Walker pasted clippings in a large bound history book. One handwritten notation indicated the number of fabric pieces needed to make the quilt, while several said "please return." Carlie Sexton made a similar scrapbook—pasting clippings over pages of an old book—and gave it to Lillian Walker. The Taylors assumed that Mrs. Walker had also made this scrapbook until the author discovered outdated Sexton pattern sheets bearing her Des Moines address pasted face down on many of the printed pages. Sexton's handwriting also appears on many of the clippings. Both books in author's collection.
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