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Recollections of Childhood Recorded in a Tennessee Quilt

Bets Ramsey

My job as crafts specialist for Senior Neighbors of Chattanooga, Inc.¹ has allowed me to make friends with many retired and elderly people from this metropolitan area. As we worked in classes and casual settings, I enjoyed hearing stories of the past when these people were young. I found that reminiscence could be a valuable tool in presenting subjects for drawing, painting, and conversation.

I remember one painting clearly. It was done by Amanda Norris, a black woman who was raised in Alabama and spent most of her life working as a maid in Chattanooga. I had asked the East Chattanooga painting group to take as their topic a childhood incident which involved a member of their family. Mrs. Norris painted a boy driving a mule-drawn wagon.

I asked Mrs. Norris to tell about the picture. "This is my brother," she said. (He was one of twelve children.) "I can still hear him coming, joggling into the yard, with one little old box knocking around in the back of the wagon. Mother sent him to town and all he had was enough money for one box of soda. That was during the Depression. Times was scarce then."

Experiences of the participants have been recorded in other ways. Some individuals have written personal accounts of their lives and used old photographs to illustrate the stories. Their collections have made special gifts for families and friends.² Doris Hays used interviews with several Senior Neighbors as part of her symphonic composition, "Southern Voices for Orchestra," which was commissioned for the Chattanooga Symphony's fiftieth anniversary.³ A documentary film about the developmental process of the piece was produced for televi-

sion. It included episodes with the persons whose voices are part of the composition.⁴ Mrs. George Power, a founder of Senior Neighbors in 1964, wrote and produced a play, "Summers on the Porch," about her youth in a small town near Atlanta, Georgia. It was directed by Nancy Lane Wright and presented to audiences in Chattanooga and Savannah.⁵ I have made tape recordings⁶ and there have been written accounts for newspaper⁷ and magazine publication.⁸

Splendid as they are, it is not enough to let these records of words and episodes and music be the sole means of noting the past. I am a visual artist and I want people to see and touch as well as read and hear. Appliqued wall hangings of some of our activities had been made as group projects, so why not a quilt?

About the time I was contemplating a quilt of memories, Cuesta Benberry sent a photograph of a charming quilt done by black senior citizens of Quincy, Illinois under the direction of Elizabeth Leiber. Most of the twenty panels show groups of people in childhood activities. The remaining squares contain buildings. The quality of artwork is evident in excellence of design and coloration. This photograph intensified my desire to make a quilted wallhanging which would record some events in the lives of our members.

The East Chattanooga Branch of Senior Neighbors and the Explorers at the Mary Walker Center were selected to work on the project. In these groups black people predominate and many came from rural backgrounds at a time when there were few modern conveniences. If their histories were not recorded now, they might never be known. This is where we began.

Every quilt is a piece of history. It is a record of the fabric of a given period. Its pattern and design reflect the style of the time. The quilt is an essay about the maker's ability, training, taste, and feelings.

The Baltimore album quilts of the 1840s and 50s are, perhaps, the prime example of a group of quilts which tell about a particular time and place. They tell of trade, commerce, sailing, and textiles, even though their makers are often concealed in mystery. Dena Katzenberg and her associates present a wealth of research in the fine catalog which accompanied the exhibition of these quilts in 1980 to 1982.⁹

Garlands, vases, and flowers are the prevailing themes among the album squares, but occasionally another subject appears. There are illustrations of buildings, steam engines, ships, sailors, hunters, a soldier, flags, monuments, fraternal emblems, and a few rare female figures.¹⁰

From these historical notations, however, we learn little of the daily life of the quilter.

We can cite other examples in private and public collections which are better examples of visually recorded history. I shall name a few.

The Sarah Furman Warner coverlet, thought to have been made about 1800, has scenes of Connecticut village and country life applied onto a large center panel. Floral garlands, vases, and birds border the scenes.¹¹

Trade and commerce was the theme of a quilt attributed to Hannah Stockton of Stockton, New Jersey, about 1830. A center Tree of Life panel is surrounded by large and small ships on a rolling sea. Below the sea is a narrower border filled with people at various tasks and industries.¹²

Virginia Ivey's stuffed, white wholecloth quilt, 1856 A Representation of the Fairground Near Russellville Kentucky, shows the participants of that event in intricate detail.¹³ It is considered one of the treasures of the Smithsonian Institution.

Victorian crazy quilts contain many fancy stitches and quaint souvenirs. Occasionally one encounters a scenic crazy quilt which gives the viewer a glimpse of the quilter's milieu. Mrs. Edwin Hardman's picture quilt is a good example of such a quilt, even though it may be a combination of fantasy, reality, and ornamentation.¹⁴ It is typical of the period.

Celestine Bacheller was more faithful to her subject when she made scenes of her town of Wyoma, Massachusetts, in the late nineteenth century. Her houses, gardens, and sea are said to be recognizable places.¹⁵

Mrs. Cecil White made a quilt, about 1930, which has forty-seven blocks filled with figures playing, working, and carrying-on. The lively, slightly exaggerated action seems almost like an old movie.¹⁶ I hope someone has the scenario.

Mary Barton designed a Pioneer Quilt to commemorate the westward movement as recorded in letters, notes, and diaries of her family. She used antique calicoes for the applique and piecework.¹⁷ Her work cannot be classified as contemporary to the period it depicts, but it is a fitting interpretation of those documents in her possession.

These personal views of one's surroundings give a warming touch to textbook history.

Our project had a different point of departure. We were not aiming

to show vignettes of contemporary Chattanooga, but, rather, to turn back to childhood happenings as best remembered. First, we had to stir the memory and hear the stories, so we had sessions of reminiscences. Initial shyness and reserve soon vanished. Before long we had a flood of stories. We talked about early childhood, grandparents, family life, going to school, the first romance, the Depression, getting married, household chores and duties.

Members became better acquainted with one another as our talks progressed. We achieved greater rapport as a group and I was able to deepen my understanding of each person. As interest grew, our story-telling attracted some people from outside the art group and we drew them in.

As an example of some of our conversations, here are excerpts from accounts of quilting and care.

"Mama quilted without a frame by laying the quilt across the bed. She used scraps of cloth and backs from sugar and flour sacks. She washed in a tin tub, with powdered Octagon soap and rub-board. She rinsed in another tub and hung the quilts on a line to dry." Ethel Dallas.¹⁸

"We took our quilts to the branch (the creek) to wash. We used homemade soap and a tub to wash in. We rinsed in the branch. Two of us wrung out the quilts by twisting from opposite ends. Then we hung them on a line at home." Reita Chastain¹⁹

"I always dyed my quilt backs with walnut hulls to keep the soil from showing. I washed the quilts once a year. We filled the iron wash-pot with well-water and built a fire under it. First we wet the quilts, rubbed them with homemade lye soap on a rub-board, and then boiled them in the pot. They were rinsed twice, wrung out, and hung on the line. Some folks dried their quilts on bushes, but that was kinda' shiftless." Blanche Hartline²⁰

"We had a battling bench (a log sawed in half, lengthwise, on legs) and a paddle to beat soapsuds into the quilts. I had to chop the wood, keep the fire going, draw the water, later empty the pot and the tubs. There was a lot of work to washing in those days." O.L. Miller²¹

"Mother kept on piecing quilts in her last years, for something to do. Her color choices weren't too good then, like they had been before. She just used what she had." Frances Bush²²

"Grandmother always had a flat-iron on the hearth when she was sew-

Fig. 1. The *Childhood Memories* quilt.

ing or piecing quilts. As she finished a block, she reached for the iron and pressed her work. That was up in Soddy, Tennessee, before TVA and electricity." Daisy Groover²³

"Grandma loved her quilts. She called them all by name: Tree of Paradise, Dad's Bowtie, Lone Star. The young folks thought she made up the names, just like they were children. She was making quilts when no one else was and had thirty or more set aside. She gave each grandchild a quilt when they went away to school." The younguns got to help wash the quilts by stomping with barefeet in the washtub. We thought it was great fun to get in the soapy water and slosh around. We didn't realize how much work we were saving our mother." Ruthenia Smith²⁴

"Grandmother sent us kids out to get tobacco bags. One peppermint stick was the reward. We'd go around where the men were sitting, smoking Bull Durham or chewing tobacco. We'd get three or four bags some days. She'd save them for quilting. Streak o' Lightening was one she made with those bags." Marie Brown²⁵

"When we went to Grandpa's house, they would spread a quilt out in the back of the wagon. Grandpa would let us get in the wagon and ride out with him wherever he was going. When we washed the quilts, the younguns could stomp the quilts in the tub. Mama was particular about rinsing. If you didn't get the soap out, it left streaks in the quilt. We had two big sticks to lift the quilt out with." Belle Fernandis²⁶

"We had four washtubs made out of barrel-halves, one for washing, three for rinsing. We put a quilt on the fence after it was washed. Then we poured water over it, to rinse it. We wrung it out again and dried it on the fence." Ella McLemore²⁷

When I told Mildred Locke about these recollections, she wanted her childhood task included. She had to turn the quilt at intervals, as it was drying on the line, to prevent dirt from settling in the edges.²⁸

Some of these experiences have been recorded elsewhere, especially in my weekly column, "The Quilter," in the *Chattanooga Times*.²⁹ Jane Henegar, Food Editor for the same paper, devoted a page to Christmas memories and recipes of Senior Neighbors.³⁰ An essay on old farm implements and their uses, as remembered by Mary Walker members, resulted from a visit to the Chattanooga Museum of Regional History.³¹

Our project began with drawings illustrating those situations we had discussed. Most of the participants had little drawing skill but, no matter how simple the style, it was important to develop the design through the eye of the originator. With a little help from the instructor, the drawings were transposed to cloth cutouts for applique onto muslin squares.

Sewing ability was minimal. There were physical and, in a few cases, mental limitations for many of the workers. Sometimes other needlewomen, behind the scene, applied additional stitches to secure the fabric for permanence. For the most part, the applique work was done by the person who had developed the scene.

Finished blocks were assembled by the instructor. The format of five blocks across horizontally and four in vertical position makes a comfortable shape for a long wall. The quilting was done by volunteers from the membership: Ruth Evans, Marie Harp, Martha Scott, Brenda Carter, and Esther Barnwell. Those at the quilting frame had many pleasant conversations with visitors who passed through the center. As they explained the project, they heard more stories in return.

Fig. 2. Ethel Dallas shows her mother churning by the stove; Mother, with switch, runs after John Daniel; and Amanda Norris does her exercises.

After the quilting and binding were completed, the quilt travelled to several locations for display. It always brought about animated conversation from observers who were not connected with the project. Those who worked on the quilt were regarded with new interest by the rest of the group. The product was tangible evidence of a series of Senior Neighbors' program activities.

The full impact of the project cannot be appreciated merely by looking at the completed wallhanging. From formulation to completion, numerous benefits accrued. Summarized thus, they have more than accomplished the original goals.

Aims of the project:

- to provide life review opportunities
- to draw a group more closely together
- to stimulate interest from those outside the group
- to foster self-expression
- to initiate a long-term project with sustained activity
- to begin with a simple idea, allowing the participants to engage in each phase of construction, to the completion of a relatively complex art form
- to raise the level of personal and group esteem
- to make a lasting monument to those who were a part of the group and to the families who raised them.

The Recollections of Childhood Quilt will not win recognition for outstanding artistic achievement, although it does have a quaint charm. It has greater merit as a social tool and modest diary of every-

day life. Its makers hope that it will continue to provide pleasure to many viewers of the future.³²



Fig. 3. Rosie Grimmiett hangs out the wash.

The Episodes Pictured on the Quilt (left to right, top to bottom):

1. Belle Fernandis: "Papa put a pigeon roost in the top of the smokehouse. A neighbor girl wanted to see one of the birds, so I climbed up and got one of the nasty, naked things, but she wouldn't take it."
2. Eddie Mae Brownlow: "As a little girl, I learned to crochet from my grandmother. I would crawl under the house to hide and practice my work."
3. Rosie Grimmiett hanging out the wash.
4. Anonymous quilter working on suspended quilting frames.

5. Edna Townsend going to the spring to get water.
6. James Cohill bringing in firewood on a homemade wagon.
7. Ardella Graves: "Brother loved to climb trees. One day he fell out of a tree and like to have scared us to death."
8. Joan Knox jumping rope.
9. Lois Ragland: "One day I was doing a dance in the house and my grandfather threw a stick of stovewood at me. He said it wasn't Christian to dance. I ducked and didn't get hit, but I never did dance again."
10. Amanda Norris' homeplace in Alabama, with well, washtub, and iron kettle.
11. Ella McLemore: The day the cow came in the house, "I was wearing red and I guess the cow chased me because of that. She came right on in the house and I hid under the bed."
12. Ethel Dallas: "We had to milk the cows, then we churned to make butter."
13. John Daniel got a switching after he knocked over the churn.
14. Amanda Norris doing her exercises.
15. Etta Wolfe riding bareback. "I always liked to take the corn to be ground into cornmeal at Kettner's Mill."
16. Jodie Brown and his friend, Waldon Knox.
17. Geneva Ware: "One day when our parents were gone we cut off a piece of ham in the smokehouse. My sister cooked it on the woodstove. It was so good, but we got a whipping for taking it."
18. Deedra Hearn and her grandmother making popcorn balls at Christmastime.
19. Joan Knox stands on a stool to wash dishes.
20. Ruthenia Smith: "I went to answer a knock at the front door. When I turned around to go back, the house was in flames. I got the kids out and one of them got the dogs. My mother ran four blocks to see about us. She ran into the arms of a fireman who said, "It's all right. They are all safe."

Notes and References

1. Senior Neighbors of Chattanooga, Inc., 10th & Newby Streets, Chattanooga, Tennessee, 37402.
2. Especially *Little Girl Doings* by Esther Barnwell, Signal Mountain, Tennessee, 1983 and *Recollections of My Mother and Father* by June W. Miller, Rossville, Georgia, 1978, both privately printed.
3. "Southern Voices for Orchestra" by Doris Hays had its premiere performance April 6, 1982 at the Tivoli Theater, Chattanooga, with Daisy Newman as soloist.
4. Directed by George Short, New York University, New York.
5. In Savannah at the Southeastern Drama Workshop, 1983.
6. "Dodson Doings: A Puppet Show" by the East Chattanooga Branch, 1977; "Memories of Childhood," East Chattanooga, 1982; personal accounts by Isidore Walker, Mary Walker Towers, 1980.
7. Especially "The Quilter" column, *Chattanooga Times*: March 24, 1981; March 31, 1981; and in 1982: April 8, 15, and 22; June 3; August 19.
8. Pat Kyser, "Pieces and Patches," *Quilt World* Vol. 8 no. 4 (August 1983), on Lola Fitzgerald, pp. 23-5.
Carter Houck, "Woman Power," *Lady's Circle Patchwork Quilts* No. 27 (Fall 1982) pp. 15-17, 73.
Bets Ramsey, "The Explorers of Mary Walker Towers, Chattanooga, Tennessee," *Appalachian Heritage* Vol. 9 no. 4 (Fall 1981) pp. 28-33.
Bets Ramsey, "Cotton Country: Redbud, Georgia, 1873-1907," *Quilt Close-up: Five Southern Views* (Chattanooga, Hunter Museum of Art, 1983), pp. 18-27.
9. Dena S. Katzenberg, *Baltimore Album Quilts*, (Baltimore Museum of Art, 1981).
10. *Ibid.* Pp. 23, 29, 37, 41, 43, 50, 51, 52, 53, 55, 57, 59, 60, 79, 83, 89, 90, 99, 101, 105, 111, 113, 115, 117, 119.
11. Patsy Orlofsky and Myron Orlofsky, *Quilts in America*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1974), p. 209. From the Collection of Greenfield Village and the Henry Ford Museum.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 213. New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown, New York.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 187. The Smithsonian Institution.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 315. Pioneer Museum and Haggin Galleries, Stockton, California.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 262. Boston Museum of Fine Arts.
16. Cyril I. Nelson and Carter Houck, *The Quilt Engagement Calendar Treasury* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1982) p. 170. Private collection.
17. Photographs of quilt taken in Warren, Michigan in 1976 by Katy Christopherson and sent to me.

18. Ethel Dallas grew up in Chattanooga.
19. Reita Chastain lived in Chattanooga Valley, in Georgia, south of Chattanooga.
20. Blanche Hartline, Chattanooga Valley.
21. Lee Miller was raised in the Redbud community near Calhoun, Georgia.
22. Frances Bush's mother lived on Lookout Mountain, Georgia.
23. Daisy Groover still lives in Soddy-Daisy, Tennessee.
24. Ruthenia Smith grew up in South Chattanooga.
25. Marie Brown lives in Sequatchie Valley, Tennessee.
26. Belle Fernandis is from Columbus, Mississippi.
27. Ella McLemore is from Alabama.
28. In conversation, Bell Buckle, Tennessee, August, 1983.
29. See note #7.
30. December 20, 1979.
31. Bets Ramsey, "The Explorers of Mary Walker Towers, Chattanooga, Tennessee," *Appalachian Heritage* Vol. 9 no. 4 (Fall 1981) pp. 28-33.
32. The quilt is installed in the Great Hall of the Senior Neighbors' Arts and Crafts Building, 10th and King Streets, Chattanooga, Tennessee.