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Quilts and Quiltmakers of the Penobscot Peninsula, Downeast Maine

Nancy Habersat Caudle

My friend Nellie Kane lives in a house down the lane from her husband's general store at the head of Morgan Bay in Surry, Maine. The course of her life has been largely determined by her husband Willard and the store, which he opened at 6 in the morning, seven days a week, for 60 years. It's an old fashioned country store with wooden floors, high ceilings, a wood stove for heat, and unsold relics of bygone years side by side with new flannel shirts and work pants, a case of marmalade twenty years old underneath the day's bread delivery. Only Willard could find anything in that store, and only he worked in it all those years—except for Nellie, who minded the store from 11:30 until noon while Willard went down to the house for his "dinner."

When Willard was twelve years old he went to sea aboard the great coastal vessels with his father who was a Captain. He sailed to ports on the East coast and across the Atlantic. His father was eventually lost at sea. After Willard opened his store, the men would come every day and sit by the stove and swap stories. And in the summers, the "summer people" would stop in the store to visit when they returned to the Maine coast from far away places.

Nellie yearned to travel, but she never learned to drive and they couldn't really get away because the store was open every day. So she subscribed to all kinds of magazines and she sent away for books—beautiful art and travel books. She's seen the world in the pages of her books. And she collected all kinds of pretty things; to walk in her house is to know that an artist lives there. It is no surprise to hear that her brothers were gifted wood carvers and craftsmen.

Small and stalwart Nellie has nursed her only child and all of her brothers and sisters through terminal illnesses. When Willard died at

home in 1983 at age 91, they had been married for 59 years—since Nellie was 19.

One November morning last year she went upstairs and came down with three beautiful quilts, which she showed me with the excitement of sharing something special. Two of the quilts she had made from wool squares cut from her daughter's school skirts, stitched together and embroidered with wool yarn. The other was a Victorian silk quilt sewn by Nellie's mother in the late 1800s, in perfect condition having been carefully stored away and never used, and of such beauty that it took my breath away.

In Nellie's sunny kitchen that morning I determined to do a quilt exhibit to honor the native-born women living in my part of coastal Maine—an opportunity to see their quilts and to tell the stories of their lives in the 1800s and 1900s. The exhibit, entitled "Downeast County Women—Quilts and Coverlets; 1800's to 1983," was shown in Blue Hill in July of 1983. Fifty quilts represented the work of thirty-three women, ten of them living. The quilts, photographs, biographies and oral histories spoke of their lives and their art.

This paper is dedicated to Nellie Margaret Carter Kane, daughter of Susie Myra Gray of Cape Rosier, Maine and Asa Carter of Surry, Maine.

THE QUILTS

From the mid-1800s coastal Maine attracted summer visitors from the cities of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, who traveled up by boat. Those with private yachts often stopped at the islands which dot the coastline and visited with the native people. They were attracted by the beautiful quilts (and no doubt the cheap prices) and often purchased the best quilts, fresh off the quilting frames.

More recently quilts have been bought by antique dealers and summer people. I was told of several favorites that were sold simply because an aggressive and persistent outsider finally wore down a timid country woman who had trouble saying no and gave in just to be rid of the person. Often the women would sell their quilts for less than the cost of materials, because they were too shy to ask a reasonable price. And the summer people were willing participants, delighted with their bargains and paying a few hours' wages for a few months' work.

Many of the best quilts have been given away to children and grandchildren who no longer live in the area. As Edna Austin put it, "What do I want with a quilt, now I have an electric blanket?"

Nearly a third of the historic quilts were discovered in attics. In Maine, houses are sometimes sold with the attic contents included, and when the houses were no longer in the original family, learning the quiltmaker's identity required some detective work.

I was shown several very heavy wool scrap quilts that the women called "vessel quilts." Smaller in size than a bed quilt, they were often embroidered with decorative stitches and initials of the men or of family members. Vessel quilts were taken to sea by men in the 1800s and early 1900s. They were a necessity for warmth aboard the coastal sailing vessels, and have a parallel in the rya rugs which Scandinavian sailors took to sea. The heavy vessel quilts were also used by the boys in the family who slept in the "Ram's Pasture" or "Glory Hole." Maine houses were very large, often three stories high, with two-story els attached to the sides or backs, which were in turn attached to the barns. Thus, it was possible to get to the barns in winter without having to venture outdoors. The kitchen was housed on the first floor of the el, and beyond it toward the barn was the woodshed. Over the woodshed and kitchen ran a long chamber, now commonly called the "shed chamber," and this cold, unfinished, attic-like room was where the boys slept, dormitory-style. The only heat was from the kitchen chimney that went up through the room.²

Traditionally, quilts were pieced, rather than appliqued, and the quilting stitches followed the pieced designs or ran horizontally, vertically and diagonally across the quilt. Except on a few contemporary quilts, there were no curved quilting patterns.

All of the women represented in the exhibit learned to quilt from their mothers, grandmothers or aunts. Although they remember their mothers sewing quiltings in the "ladies' sewing circles" that once met regularly at the churches and community halls along the coast, most now do their quilting at home alone, or with a friend or two. None of them belong to the quilting guild, whose membership is composed mostly of women "from away."

THE QUILTMAKERS

Clara Vivian Carver Orcutt³

In April, 1984 Clara Orcutt celebrated her one hundredth birthday. She lives in her own apartment and as Stonington's oldest citizen is the proud holder of its gold tipped Boston Post Cane. She was born

in Nanticoke, Pennsylvania in 1884, the daughter of Amelia Brown and Thomas Vivian, immigrants from England who met and married in the United States. When Clara was a year old, Amelia left her first husband and brought her daughter to Maine and the Penobscot Peninsula. They lived on Cape Rosier and Amelia found a job with Fred Carver, looking after his twelve-year-old daughter who was ill with tuberculosis. He had already lost his wife in childbirth and his other children to disease. Fred and Amelia eventually married and moved to Hog Island, one of several islands that Fred owned, about four miles from South Brooksville in the East Penobscot Bay. He loved the five-year-old Clara and she adored him. He called her, affectionately, "my boy" and she became in many ways the son he never had.

Clara worked hard. She cooked when she was eight years old, helped put up enough hay to feed the hundred sheep on the island, farmed, cared for the animals, even built stone walls. Her schooling lasted about three months each year when she was boarded over on the mainland. By the age of twelve she had a twenty-one foot sailboat and quite a reputation as a sailor, as well as some narrow escapes from the sea.

Clara says she finally decided when she was fifteen, "If I've got to work like this, I'm goin' away and get some money so's I can get me some decent clothes!" That was the year 1899. She laughs and adds, "The next year I went to work, and I worked ever after until I was married." Clara would return to Hog Island only in the summers after that.

Referring to the photo on the exhibit poster of a sixteen-year-old Clara with a large hat precariously balanced on her head, Clara says,

That hat tickled you, didn't it? I bought that hat in Rockland. Yessir, that hat cost me four dollars. I had to work two weeks getting it. They had a millinery thing there in Castine. After I got up there I had it made over twice. She had a darlin' little shop and I'd go there and set and watch her. I don't s'pose I wore it half a dozen times after I got it. The woman where I was stayin' workin' had a parrot, a green parrot, and she wanted me to put it on there. I never wore it. I wouldn't wear the darn thing after I got it fixed up. I took it off—snatched it off!

I've made my own clothes since I was twelve years old. I cut 'em out and made 'em . . . made myself three suits. As I was sayin', I worked at Castine . . . and I got a chance to buy a pretty kind of mauve . . . and I made me a nice suit out of that. Next summer I went over for somethin' to Castine and these boys was goin'

up the other side of the road. They says, 'There goes Clara Carver and she's got the same suit she's had last year.' I turned round and I said, 'And it's paid for!' And I kept on going. I was sassy then!

In 1902 when Clara was eighteen she worked for six or seven months for the lighthouse keeper on Eagle Island in the East Penobscot Bay, cooking and washing for his family, as well as for the government employees.

They had young ones galore, and then there were five of the government people there, sixteen of us. I had to work for two dollars a week. The government supplied all of the food and provisions. They had prunes by the boxfull and I had to have prunes three times a day on the table. They used to laugh themselves sick, you know. They said I had a wheelbarrow—that I used to take and put the stones in that. And they called it Prunestone Reef out to the big buoy. Just comical.

When Clara was twenty-one she married her first husband, John A. Soper, the father of her two daughters. Years later, in the early 1930s, she and her second husband, Myrle V. Orcutt, owned the *William P. Boggs*, a two-masted schooner that carried pulpwood along the coast.

When asked about quilting Clara replies,

Oh, Lord, I've made quilts ever since I can remember. I started in when I got married first—I was going on twenty-one. I started in then, I kept makin', makin', making. There's fifty over that I made. Everybody'd get married or wanted somethin' and they got a quilt!

I enjoyed every bit, *every* bit of it. I would like to do it now and I would, but I can't see right, you know. I'd have to do 'em all by hand. But I could do it if I could only see enough to put the stitches right. But they don't suit me, the stitches don't, you know. No, I *love* to sew. There's nothing I love more!

Clara's daughter, Jeanne Richard of Burnt Cove near Stonington, joined us for an interview and spoke about summer girlhood memories of her grandmother and aunt quilting over on Hog Island.

They [Amelia and her sister, Louisa] made beautiful quilts, Bear's Paw and Pine Cone, or something like that, and some sort of a spruce tree. I remember one they made especially was a beautiful green material, fine print, and it had a couple of other colors for

background. And I loved that quilt! And they sold that.

That was their pastime, makin' quilts, and they always quilted them. Grandpa Carver made a frame. Two of them [quilted] generally. And when Aunt Lou lived with us one winter my step-father made a frame and we all quilted in the living room then. Just for the fun of doing somethin'. She'd [Clara] make the quilt and then we'd quilt on them. And they were beautiful, too, but I don't know what she did with them. She probably gave them away. If they got a lot for a quilt it was probably no more than twenty-five or thirty dollars. And they'd spend weeks and weeks just making the top, and the quilting took a *long* time.

When we were on the Island, there were a lot of yachts used to come in there because it was a beautiful beach. And they'd come ashore and get talkin' to my folks and they'd show 'em the quilts and then they'd want to buy 'em so they'd sell them to them. All the really beautiful quilts [were sold]. We ended up with just the scrap quilts.

Winifred Marian Cole Means⁴

Winnie Means was born on Long Island in Blue Hill Bay in 1893, the daughter of Annie Sarah Butler from Bartlett's Island and Benjamin Percy Cole of Long Island. This island, five miles long and over two miles across at its widest point, supported a population of about thirty at the turn of the century, but no one has lived there since World War I, and when Winnie left in 1913, she was the last girl to live on the island.

Since 1915 she has lived in the same two-story white farmhouse in North Brooklin, a typical Maine house with woodshed attached to the kitchen and barn attached to the woodshed. A widow, she shares the house with her son, one of her five children. In addition to quilts, Winnie, a true folk artist, created beautiful hooked and braided rugs, painted pictures of lighthouses, and today makes applehead dolls. She displayed the latest dolls at our spring visits. They were headless, waiting for fall and the harvest of apples from a particular tree beyond the garage.

Winnie learned to sew when she was twelve or thirteen years old. She remembers,

Mother used to sew quite a lot of patchwork, but of course she had a big family and'd take in some people to board that would

be on there [the island] trappin' or huntin'. She didn't get too much time. I used to sew quite alot. But my time when I was young to home was quite well taken up. It was a long ways to walk to school. About two miles and a half.

We used to make quilts out of pieces . . . when we'd make aprons and dresses and stuff, we'd save the small cuttins' and just make what we called crazy work, and we had quite a few of them quilts made. I haven't made a silk quilt. I made a Sunshine and Shadow quilt for Mother and we had it all the time we was together. They're easy to make, awful easy to make. They make a pretty quilt. [This is Winnie's favorite pattern and it reappears in her rugs, also.] There's probably none of it left now, I don't imagine. There's been other people in the house and I suppose they wore it out or throwed it on the dump.

There was a store on there [the island]. Mrs. Duffy kept a store. You could get thread and cloth and needles and groceries and most anything that you'd want. My brother had a nice power boat . . . and we used to come across here [to the Peninsula mainland] to the stores and we used to go to Ellsworth and go shopping up there, and we used to go down to Bass Harbor and Goose Cove and those places by boat. If you didn't go by boat you stayed where you was, that was all. It was go by boat or nothing. I liked the boats and I've always missed them. I think you do if you grow up on an island. The cars are nice and they're awful handy, but I still like the old boat.

They had what they call a little sewin' circle over there on the island. They'd be makin' the quilt—all one pattern. And when they got the quilt made, they'd usually have tickets to sell on it. And the one that got the lucky ticket was the one that drewed the quilt. [Quilts were 'put up on tickets' to benefit the church.] Now they don't have any sewing circle. The older folks that had all those times is all up in the cemetery.

What fine stitchen' them old people done. They didn't have anything else to do. No radio to listen to, no television to watch. Unless some neighbor come in and set and talk, they didn't have anything else to do. No car to jump into to go twenty-five or thirty miles. They'd have an old horse and a wagon they could go two or three miles with. But most of them didn't have nothin' to do and nowhere to go, really.

Ella Hollowell Rogers⁵

Ella was born in Lubec, Maine, in 1905, the daughter of Anna Doon of Lubec and Fred Hollowell of Edmunds. Her father was a sea captain and in 1919 when Ella was fourteen and her mother was only thirty-eight, Ella's father and sixteen-year-old brother were lost at sea.

He was coming home to Lubec with a load of coal from New York in the *Spartel*. It was a beautiful day when he started. And he got caught in one of these quick, awful, wild northern snowstorms—blizzards. And she come as far as Portland lightship with her sails gone and her distress signals up and that's the last they ever heard of her. And you know that's an awful life for a woman to have her husband go to sea.

Ella lived in Lubec until she married Philip Rogers of East Machias in 1927 and moved to Ellsworth, and eventually to Surry where she has lived for forty years. She is a widow and lives in a little house built next to her daughter's especially for her. With only one child, Ella had time to quilt and she made them all of her life, carefully hand piecing and hand quilting.

I used to have the quiltin' frame and put em' right in the living room. It made an awful mess. I couldn't hardly get around, but Philip didn't mind. He was awful good about help rollin' em', 'cause that takes two, you know, to roll the frames.

It's a good pastime. I'd like to be doin' it again, but now my fingers get numb and I can't hold on that small needle. And of course my eyes, I've only got one good eye.

I made a quilt called a Texas Star and it was my favorite. I started with a blue star in the middle, then a row of printed calico and then a yellow row and I kept goin' that way until it was done. And then I set it together with yellow, and a yellow border and a yellow background, and it *was* beautiful! It was so delicate, you know. [A woman] wanted to buy it. I said I didn't want to sell it. And she said, well, she'd like to have it for her daughter. I did tell her I didn't want to sell it, but she just hung on and hung on. And I thought, well, if I put a good price on it, she won't take it. So I said thirty-five dollars, and she snapped it right up quick. It was handsome! And I really felt bad to sell it. I always planned on making another, but I never got around to it.

I don't like polyester, it's too heavy. I just like cotton, but I'm old fashioned. It's easier to sew. Of course, I suppose if someone

wants to make them on the sewing machine, why it's easier. But I don't like to use the sewing machine. I like to do them by hand. I use just plain cotton thread and in between needles.

I made twenty-one [quilts] for outsiders, and then of course, I made all for the kids and the grandchildren and the great grandchildren. I made a lot of those Grandmother's quilts [Grandmother's Flower Garden].

Ella tells me about a stunning red, Texas Star quilt top in the exhibit, and the last quilt she will ever make because of her deteriorating eyesight.

You know I made that and I figured it won't amount to nothin'. I had some red and white left over and I just stuck it together. I didn't want to bother to buy cotton to set the corner pieces in, so I just put the rest of them little pieces and sewed 'em together. And I never bothered to make it up [quilt it], because I figured that won't amount to nothin' and no one will ever want it. And Dickie [her grandson] liked it so I gave it to him.

They're some awful pretty quilts in the country. I always look at the clotheslines when I go along and see if I can see any.

Lillian Agnes Friend Williams⁶

Lillian Williams was born in Blue Hill in 1916, the daughter of Mabel Staples and Watson Friend, both of Blue Hill. She was married to Frank Carter and they raised seven children in Sedgwick. After his death she married Edmund Williams and moved to Brooklin, where they live in an old Maine cape house surrounded by their vast and beautiful blueberry fields. They go tent camping all over the Northeast and Canada, and Lillian makes quilts as gifts for her many children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews and also sells some through local craft stores.

Lillian relates,

I was eleven years old, twelve years old. I can remember settin' there in the wintertime under that 40-watt bulb sewing them quilts. Can you picture them today? Sewin' under a 40-watt bulb?

I just love to sew. I was about ten years old and my mother had an orange dress with blue flowers on it. She was working and when she came home at night I'd ripped the dress up and cut it all up and made myself a dress out of her new dress. Oh, I wanted

to sew so bad! And she didn't give me the devil for it either. I was just crazy to sew! I looked all around and couldn't find anything else but that orange dress, so I just cut it up and made me a dress! She just said, 'Oh, my Lord, Lillian, you shouldn't have cut up my dress!' It was just a work dress, really. I used to sit in school and draw the pictures of the dresses I was going home and make. I made all my patterns out of newspaper. Still do.

We used to get ten cents for a can of clams, pickin' them out. And I picked out six cans and got sixty cents and I sent to Sears and Roebuck and got five yards of green plaid and three yards of red plaid—ten cents a yard. Oh, it was beautiful material! Made me a red dress and a green dress. The red one come up here and tied like rabbit ears at the top. I was only about thirteen years old at the time. You know, they don't have material like they did in those days. You can't buy that nice cotton! Why, that was beautiful cotton. There was something to it. It wasn't sleazy.

In response to a question about how her husband feels about quilting, Lillian says,

Edmond thinks anybody ought to keep busy all the time, which is right. So he thinks it's lovely. I gave this quilt to his niece and there's over fifty dollars worth of material in it. So I said to him, 'Edmond, I made this and I'd like to give it to Gloria. How do you feel about it?' And he said, 'If you enjoyed makin' it, I know you're going to enjoy givin' it to her.' And I said, 'And she's going to be so tickled, she's going to cry.' You never saw anybody so tickled in your *life* as she was!

Beulah Black Kennedy⁷

Beulah Kennedy was born in 1918 at Brooksville Corner, the daughter of Clarissa Babson of Brooksville Corner and Captain Guy Black of South Brooksville. Her father and her grandfather, Captain Burt Kennedy, were sea captains and at one time they owned the *Mattie*, a schooner which still plies the coastal route, although now its cargo is summer tourists. In 1940 Beulah married her high school sweetheart, Clair Kennedy, and they lived in several states and Canada while they raised their four children. After Clair's death she moved back to her birthplace and took up quilting for the first time since before her children were born.

(l. to r.) Beulah Kennedy, Clara Orcutt, Alice Hawes (not in this paper), Edna Austin and Winnie Means, at the exhibit reception, Blue Hill, July 10, 1983. In the back is Ella Rogers' Star quilt top. Photo by Charley Freiberg.

In the summer of 1975, she was managing a craft store in Blue Hill where several of her quilts were on sale, when a woman named Mary Kelleher asked her to make a memory quilt which would depict her childhood summers in the family summer home on Eggmoggin Reach in the 1920s. Since 1969 Mary and her sister Eleanor had lived permanently in Sargentville. Mary says, "My brother was killed in World War II, and my mother and father had passed away. I wanted to remember things as they were." Thus began the Kelleher Memory Quilt. Beulah recalls:

Mary said she'd make a list of things she wanted on the quilt, and after awhile she did. They have two houses in Sargentville, one below the other, down on the water. They wanted those two houses on the quilt and they wanted the boathouse, and a sailboat and a lobsterboat. And their mother loved roses, so they wanted her roses on the trellis. And they wanted their mother and father and brother and the two of them. This is their memory and I became a part of it somehow. I became a part of their family.

So they brought me photographs and I got together quite often with them and I got to know about the family and their sad things as well as their happy things. I really got engrossed in it. I'd talk

to them every once in awhile, you know, just to see just how this would go or that would go, or just how it was. It was their past, really, and it was really a lot of fun. I don't remember how long it took, but it seems to me it was around a year.

The memory quilt is the sisters' most cherished possession. "It means everything to me," says Mary. It is a measure of their affection and admiration for Beulah and their desire for others to see the beauty of her creativity and artistry that they parted with it, even temporarily, for the exhibit. Beulah, who continues to make quilts on commission, says,

I've always been interested in every kind of sewing. And, I don't know, I just got hooked. While you're quilting, there's a lot of other things to think about. You may use your daughter's old dress for some of the pieces, and remember how she wore it to her first party, or sew on some material that was left over from something a friend made for you, and you think of that person. There are so many trains of thought involved, you know.

Quilting is so much like *living*, because you make mistakes and then you step back and learn from them. Sometimes you think, 'I'll never do it; it'll never come out right.' But you put it away that night and then maybe the next day try something else. Like everything else in life, if you keep with it long enough, eventually you'll come up with something worthwhile.

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