

Uncoverings

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Talula Gilbert Bottoms and her Quilts

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Two quilts made just 50 years apart (1885 and 1935), a little book of memories written at age 81, and several boxes of old letters were the materials at the root of this research on my grandmother's quilts. But it was an unplanned visit to the Folk Art Center of the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild in North Carolina, resulting in encouragement by Bets Ramsey and Sally Garoutte, that made me aware of Talula as a quilter whose story should be told. The two quilts, the Feather and the Lifeboat, then seemed like parentheses enclosing her lifetime of quilting, just waiting for someone to discover the history between them. Yet evidence from the above materials and from personal interviews, photographs, and letters from the present owners, shows that numerous quilts were made after 1935, and that there are yet more to discover.

Talula Bottoms (1862-1946) was a delicate little woman who bore 12 children and raised nine of them and three orphan children to adulthood, while doing the work of a Southern farmer's wife without indoor plumbing or other modern conveniences until she was 78 years old. During this time she pieced as many as 200 quilts and quilted most of them herself. She continued to piece quilt tops after the old home was remodeled to accommodate her son's family (leaving no room for her quilting frame) and ceased her beloved work only a few weeks before her death at age eighty-four. I have been able to verify over 100 existing quilts made by her, more than forty of which I have seen and photographed.

She was born on February 15, 1862, about 20 miles from Atlanta, Georgia, at a time when the South was still hopeful of victory in the Civil War. Atlanta was the chief depot for Confederate military supplies and was therefore a prime target for General Sherman in his

march to the sea. Yet the war seemed far away as John Joseph Gilbert and his wife Holly welcomed their second daughter and fourth child into their comfortable Fayette County farm home. It was not until the guns could be heard as Sherman's men approached Atlanta in the summer of 1864 that John Gilbert knew he must take his children and Holly—expecting another child in December—to a safer place in south Georgia. They would return in November, just a few weeks before baby Minta was born, and after the destruction of Atlanta, to find Fayette County devastated but their home still intact.

One of Talula's earliest memories is of that return home by wagon when the children, black and white together, were allowed to eat bread soaked in molasses spilled in the wagon from a broken jug. The ravages of the war and its aftermath included the death of Holly Gilbert a year later when Talula was not yet four years old. Her mother's funeral was on Christmas Eve, 1865, and seven months later her father brought home a new wife. Talula had been told that her father would bring her "Ma" home that day; the disappointment at not seeing her own mother so disturbed her that for months afterwards when she would be out in the yard playing, she "would go sit on a certain stump that was there and cry for a long time each day, and no one could get me to tell what I was crying about."¹

After the war economic conditions were so harsh the children had to pick up the work (formerly done by slaves) as soon as they were able to hold a broom or wring the heavy work-clothes, sheets, and even quilts, out of the steaming wash water. For Talula this was at age ten; after her older sister was married she would often have to stay out of school to help.

When we would do the washing, my step-mother put turpentine in the little jar of lye soap we had to use to wash; and washing the clothes in warm water with our hands (for no washboards or machines were known in Georgia at that Time) we both took a bad case of rheumatism ... from breathing the fumes. I had to crawl to the fireplace every morning when I'd get up, and rub my feet and ankles to get them so I could hobble about. Little sister Minta was in bed flat of her back and couldn't get up at all. ... I never got the



Fig. 1. Talula Gilbert at age 16 (copied from an old tintype).

(pain and swelling) out of my ankles until after I was married and got rested being off my feet. I had to be on them so much that they could not get well.

Part of that time I couldn't do one thing to be on my feet, so my step-mother had me card bats for quilting quilts. I carded a hamper basket piling full besides some more for one quilt. I don't know how many quilts that one big basket full made, tho guess there was enough for several quilts.²

Soon there were four more children in the family, making ten, plus hired men who were boarders, for whom to wash, iron, cook, clean, spin and weave, knit and sew, make a garden year-'round, milk the cows, and raise the chickens. No wonder Talula had not been taught to sew, for her step-mother Ann Eliza was a meticulous, practical woman, and Talula was now her chief help. Yet even at age ten Talula had seen the beautiful quilts her own mother had made, and no amount of discouragement or harsh circumstances could prevent the eventual flowering of her talent.

I would find needles and pins on the floor where they had

dropped them when at work and I would save them to sew and pin my doll clothes ... I kept them in the loft of our playhouse. My Father had built a small house at the well to keep the milk cool, but my stepmother did not use it, so the two little girls had it for a playhouse. I was large enough to work ... but kept my dolls and sewing things there. One day I had stayed up in the loft so long and neglected my work, that my stepmother said she would have my brother go up there and throw them down (in the lot, where the stock would trample them). I began to cry and told her I wanted to save my needles and pins and quilt scraps. She told me to go up and get them then. So I saved (them) and began to piece on a quilt.

My girl friend gave me a little square she had made and told me to make a square for her. So I pretended to make one, but alas, it was crank-sided; some pieces were larger than others and it was a mess, for I had never been taught to sew anything. Tho I gave it to my friend, as it was the best I could do. It was a nine patch square....

Then I went to work to make a quilt like the square the girl gave me ... when I was thru my other work of cooking, washing, etc., I'd piece on my quilt squares when I could, but they were kindly like the first square, tho I got enough squares to make a quilt. Then my grandmother helped me put it together.³

Though the girl children did not work in the fields, they had to help with the ginning by driving the horses to turn the big cog wheel, by dragging the huge hampers of cotton, into which the pickers had emptied their sacks, up to the gin, and by pulling the "lint cotton" hampers up to the press. Then after the day's work was over, it was the children's job to clean the lint room:

In those days there would be a lot of the fine cotton that would stick around and up in the roof of the lint room. My stepmother would have that saved to quilt the common everyday quilts with, tho it would be so dusty and dirty we'd have to put it on the bed scaffold and whip the dust and dirt out of it. Then we'd have to card it into bats with an old-fashioned pair of cards. Then we'd lay every bat, one by one on the lining of the quilt to be quilted which was already laced into the frames. Then the quilt top was put on

and sewed down around the edge of the lining. Then the everyday, or night quilts were laid off in shells to be quilted.

The nice quilts, as they called them, were quilted by the piece and were nicely quilted.⁴

Ann Eliza's exacting standards and Talula's desire to please her combined to keep her a veritable slave to the family all through her teen years. Her sisters and her brother's wife urged her to marry any one of the many eligible young men who were, one after the other, her "beaux." Her stepmother highly disapproved of the only one she liked, young Tom Bottoms, whose widowed mother was struggling to hold on to the family farm. Tom, born in 1860, had been his father's 17th child and his own mother's eighth, and had reached manhood just at the time the depression following the Civil War was severely undercutting the gains the Southern people had made after Reconstruction. Tom lived with his mother, Eliza McElroy Bottoms, in the old home his father had built in the 1840's, and he was her only support.

The reason Talula's family gave for disapproval of Tom was that he had "no business sense." More important perhaps was a not-so-subtle social distinction: the Bottoms women had to work in the field and the Gilbert women did not. But Talula persisted in allowing Tom to come to see her, for in her character was a stubborn strength born out of her early hardships, and a sure knowledge of what she wanted. (Figure 1) Early in her memoir she wrote:

When I grew up I had lots of beaux but didn't like them until once a young fellow with black hair and black eyes came to see me, shyly. I had liked him since childhood and one Sunday while riding with Tom Hill just after he had asked me to marry him, we met the blackheaded boy riding a pony. Right then and there I decided I'd never marry anyone as long as he was single, tho I didn't know he'd ever come to see me, or want me to marry him.⁵

Yet for nearly two years after Tom's proposal, Talula would not give him a firm answer. She explains her uncertainty:

It was hard for me to decide what to do . . . as I had been told by my step-mother that if I married I would take consumption and die like my mother and my aunt did . . . I was a weakly little girl . . . and I got stronger, and have lived with the one I liked best to be 81 years old, and hope I can live with him longer.⁶

When Tom's visits abruptly stopped (he had split his foot open with an axe, could not walk, and was ashamed for her to know it), and she did not hear from him for several months, Talula grew alarmed. She broke with tradition, quite improperly wrote him a note, and the wedding took place ten days later. It is revealing that not until after her marriage was Talula able to piece and applique "the nice quilts, as they called them" or to be free of the rheumatic pain and swelling in her ankles and feet.

When I got married, I had quilted only one quilt and had one top ready to quilt, that I had pieced at nights and little odd times. I had always had so much work to do for the family that I had no time for piecing quilts ... I loved to piece and work on my quilt work, so I decided to put in every moment of my time that I was not busy at something that was needed more, I'd work on my quilt work ... When I could get the material to work with.⁷

Within weeks after her marriage, Talula found out her mother-in-law was in imminent danger of losing her farm. She had signed notes that had essentially mortgaged the place to cover losses by an older son in his saw-mill business. The debts, though small by today's standards, could not be paid, without "stinting to the bone." There was talk of letting Mr. Blalock, who had bought up the notes, have the place and the family moving as homesteaders to Sand Mountain, Alabama, where "people could inter [sic] a place by paying \$18 for an intery of 160 acres with sometimes a small house and a few acres cleared."⁸ One of Tom's older brothers had already moved there. Talula was heartsick. Finally she decided to tell her father, who soon paid off the notes, took the farm and deeded it to Talula. The humiliation was hard on Tom, but the improved conditions enabled Eliza Bottoms, a fine quilter in her own right, and Talula to buy new material for quilts.

I would get patterns from anyone I could. I even borrowed one quilt from my step-mother's sister ... It was very pretty. Then I got the patterns off all my own mother's nice quilts, and one off my step-mother's nice quilt. She didn't have but one, that was the Orange Bud. But my grandmother Gilbert told me lots of times that it was my own mother's quilt...⁹

The nice quilts that Talula tells of having made during the first



Fig. 2. Rocky Mountain, pieced 1884, quilted 1893. Photo courtesy Mary Alice Butler.

years of her marriage are ones she herself considered special. The ones she names in her letters and her memoirs from this period besides the Orange Bud are the Road to Texas, Feather, Rocky Mountain, Basket of Flowers, Basket of Pears, Magnolia Leaf, Star and Chain, and Glittering Star. Of these, six have been found and two others are thought to be packed away in trunks or boxes in storage rooms, too difficult for the families who have them to get at in their present circumstances.

The Rocky Mountain (Figure 2), probably Talula's first nice pieced quilt, was made, as were all of these early quilts, from patterns she cut herself by borrowing quilts she admired. This one came from her step-mother's sister, Molly Tarpley, later to be her father's third wife. The Tarpleys had come to Fayette County from

Henry County, and no doubt the quilt's name was the one this pattern was known by in Georgia at that time, although most authorities today call it New York Beauty.

Talula's Rocky Mountain, pieced before 1885 and quilted in 1893, is a striking red, green, and white quilt, each tiny red triangle cut by hand and joined to quarter circles of green against white to form the 16-inch blocks. The 7-inch wide sash joining the blocks is pieced with red and white triangles on center strips of green. The points on the sash where the blocks meet and the four corners are emphasized by 7-inch squares of red into which are pieced small red, green, and white sunbursts. Three 1½-inch borders of green, red, green at top and bottom make the quilt's size 76 x 85 inches. The entire top is made by hand with the tiniest of stitches and the quilting is exquisite, creating an overall spectacular effect. The only machine stitching on the quilt joins the pieces of coarsely woven unbleached muslin lining and attaches the red binding. The quilting was done by eye measurement following the design of the quilt; no marking is visible and the quilt has never been cleaned or washed.

The Basket of Pears, called Pear Basket by Talula's granddaughter in Nevada who inherited it through her father Matt, is an unusual quilt. Its stylized baskets with pieced saw-tooth handles contain one pear and two leaves. The same tiny calico prints, one yellow on green, the other white and green on red that are pieced with white muslin to form the blocks, are also used for the wide red, green, red sash that joins them, and for the three borders. The quilt has an interesting composition in that the fifteen full blocks, set diagonally so the basket handles face the center, come out uneven, and the bottom corners are completed with quarter squares, with nine triangle half-squares showing basket handles and pears around sides and top of quilt, and two at the bottom. With its fine grid quilting, the quilt has a subdued old look showing it has no doubt been put on the best bed for company over the years. It is now with Talula's great-grandson's family in Texas, who also have the Star and Chain.

The Magnolia Leaf was apparently the local name of a variation of an old pattern identified as Oak Leaf and Reel in *America's Quilts and Coverlets*.¹⁰ Talula's leaf, appliqued in dark green calico is slightly wider than those in the quilt pictured in Safford and Bishop's book; the little "acorns" are more rounded, and the square in the center is the same dark green calico as the leaves so that the magnolia leaf seems to be laid over the red print reel. This is the only one of



Fig. 3. *The Feather*, appliqued 1885, quilted 1892.

Talula's quilts so far discovered adorned with hearts in the quilting. It is now displaying its ancient beauty for Talula's great-granddaughter in Ohio, who also has another striking old quilt, intricately pieced by Talula in yellow and red on white muslin in a pattern today known as Chinese Fan.¹¹

Talula's daughter Mollie Ruth considered the Feather (Figure 3) the most exceptional of all her mother's quilts. When some time after 1915 she and her older sister Almira "drew straws" for this quilt and the Rocky Mountain, Mollie Ruth did not draw the one she wanted, nor did Almira. Yet each could see the other's disappointment, so after some hesitation the exchange was made. Both quilts ended up with Almira when Mollie Ruth predeceased her in 1978, but Mollie Ruth had already had more than thirty years to enjoy it.

The story of the Feather is best told in Talula's own words:

Dear Daughter,

Yes! I just got your letter ... felt sure of one telling that you got the quilt. Glad it went thru all right. Glad you had it sent to you. Know you enjoy showing it. I got the pattern from "Sister Sousan" Bro. George's wife. She made two of them, one for Papa's mother and one for herself.

When Mother [Eliza Bottoms] divided her quilts, Mrs. Liza Elmore was there and all the daughter-in-law(s). So Mrs. Liza placed the quilts on five chairs, as Mother had 5 children ... We in-laws all went into the hall, and Mrs. Liza fixed them as she pleased ... She placed the Feather quilt on first chair, also other best ones, and then the second best on second chair, and the next best on next, and so on, until the worst ones were on the fifth chair. So naturally, the oldest one was the one who got the first chair (and the best quilts), next oldest got next best, and so on. So Sister Sousan got the Feather quilt ... Then after all was over and the others had carried their quilts away, Mother said to me that she "did want Tommie to have the Feather quilt" ... So Tommie got the poorest bunch; they were all very good, but just very common quilts.

Well, I decided I'd get the Feather pattern and make myself one. So I soon got the pattern and goods, and made it when I was about 23 or 24 years old. Then I kept it with several other nice tops I had made ... as we were married three years before any children came. So I made nice quilt tops during that time. After the children began to appear (there was one each year for 5 or 6 years, and I had my hands full) the nice pretty tops had to lay away in a trunk until I could have a little time to quilt them ... when I quilted the Feather quilt I had 3 little boys and they liked to play in the yard. But it was funny to them for one at a time to come in and stand by me while I quilted and fan me with a large palmetto fan. When one was tired I had him go out and let another come in to fan me. Now this is the history of the Feather quilt.¹²

Talula's Feather, circa 1885, is appliqued in olive green (somewhat changed from its original color) and bright red on fine white muslin, with a coarsely-woven unbleached muslin lining. The batting is a

thin layer of hand carded cotton and the quilting is done in exquisite scallops, tiny even stitches 10 or more per inch, to follow the pattern of the plumes. The appliqued plumes, eight to each square, four pairs of red and green turned toward each other, are quilted so as to leave a small plume-shaped puff in the center of each one. There are nine blocks, the three center ones being 27½ inches square and the six end ones 27½ x 30 inches, making the overall size 82 by 87 inches. The quilt is alive with color, texture and movement. Its only flaw is that it is machine bound, rather unevenly, as if Talula was just learning to do that kind of sewing machine work.¹³

It is difficult to guess whether this was the Feather variation of any particular family, for as Talula says, she borrowed quilts from anyone she could. And though Susan Collins Bottoms was the source of Talula's pattern in 1885, it would be impossible to say where Susan's came from. Found among Talula's old quilt patterns was a single brittle sheet, the cover page of a 1928 *Southern Agriculturist*; reversed it shows a picture of a Prince's Feather block, and describes another old Feather quilt found in a remote country home in Alabama.¹⁴

Talula's letter to Mollie Ruth continues:

I had made 5 or 6 real nice pretty quilt tops before any children came to our home . . . After several years of regular work with the children I began to quilt the nice quilts . . . the Feather first. So I finally got them all quilted . . . Then as they married, I gave a nice quilt to each. Ary got the Basket of Flowers, Matt got Basket of Pears, Emmett got Magnolia Leaf, Roger got The Road to Texas, I think. Then came the division of the Feather and Rocky Mountain quilts, so you and Sister got them. Burlie got the Glittering Star, I think, Gilbert is to get the Star and Chain quilt. It isn't as pretty as the others, though I may make them a prettier one, but can't quilt it now.¹⁵

The Glittering Star that Talula mistakenly thought Burlie got has been found in a cedar chest in Alabama, waiting for the return from the mission field in Africa of Almira's youngest daughter. Each star of the 30 12-inch blocks is pieced with 3 to 15 different calicos. Each of the 8 diamonds that make up the stars contain three calico and two muslin pieces so that the calico points are set apart to give the glittering effect. The quilt contains more than 100 different calicos and has a note attached in Almira's writing, "Quilt made by Talula

Gilbert Bottoms in late 1800's." Five other Glittering Star quilts Talula made later have been found, all except one of which utilize multiple calicoes in each star. That one is less interestingly pieced with only one calico and the muslin in each star. Ironically, it is the only one of these that is a "planned" quilt (made up in coordinated colors) and beautifully framed on four sides with a pieced border. These quilts emphasize both Talula's artistry and her frugality, for the tiniest pieces of left-over material were used to create these sophisticated "scrap" quilts.

Instead of the Star and Chain that Talula's youngest son was to get, Gilbert and his wife Mayme, married in 1933 in Michigan, were given two very special quilts thought to have been made between 1900 and 1912, after Talula, Tom and their seven children moved to Sand Mountain, Alabama. One of these was the Dutch Rose, the blocks made of solid deep green and red on a muslin background, with the wide green, red, green sash emphasized at block points by small nine-patch squares. It is so lovely one must wonder at Talula's taking it with her to Battle Creek Sanitarium in Michigan, where she went in 1912 for treatment of "female problems" so serious she was not expected to live. While she was there another patient so admired the quilt he wanted to buy it, and Grandma, always generous, was willing to sell, but when the time came for her to leave, the man could not be found, and the quilt came home with Talula.

The other special old quilt that went to Gilbert and Mayme was the Honey Bee with its deep red and blue-green pieced and appliqued design set in a soft white muslin background. The patterned squares are put together diagonally with alternating plain muslin squares. Filled with thick cotton batting, the quilt is much heavier and thicker than Talula's other quilts, so that one is amazed at the small, even stitches in the 1/2 to 3/4-inch grid of the plain squares. The superb quilting was done by eye measurement, judging from a slight unevenness in grid width and absence of marking. It was probably made about the same time as the Dutch Rose, 1900 to 1912, and could perhaps be accurately dated by the unusual solid green, and the red which is deeper than Turkey red and tends to bleed, though not to fade.

The scope of this paper does not permit discussion deserved by so many more of Talula's quilts, nor of the family, economic, and health problems brought on by World War I, the loss of two adult sons, and the onset of the Great Depression when two other sons

lost their farms and there was danger of the old parents losing theirs. Even when Talula began having "curious spells" in the 1930s diagnosed as angina, she could rise above it for she never stopped piecing her quilts. Three Lone Star quilts pieced and quilted by Talula in late 1920s or early 1930s have been found, the material furnished to her by those for whom she was making them.

In 1934 Talula persuaded Burlie to drive her back to Georgia, to see once more the places and people she loved. Two brothers and one sister, cousins, and friends were still living there, and Talula came home ecstatic. She wrote a letter, alive with detail and excitement "To all my children and grandchildren in the US," perhaps to send round-robin, for the letter came back home to be put away in Tommie's childhood tool chest where she kept things she treasured. A significant part of that 18-page letter follows:

October 22, 1934 . . .

At Johnnie May's we saw the old, old "Dahlia" quilt of my step grandmother's . . .

'Then we went to my brother Bud's across the street and I spent that night with him, for I had not seen him. He was the one that came so near dying in the summer . . .

"Well, while at Bud's I got to talking about the old quilt of my mother's that went to Bud. So Etta got it to show me, and I asked her to let me bring it home with me to try to get the pattern and make a square. So she did and I have made one square. It is very, very, pretty, and as none of us knew the name of it I have named it "The Life Boat," as the 5 blue corner pieces resemble oars more than anything. The center can be the boat and have 5 oars at each of the four corners. It is made in red, white, and blue."¹⁶

The Lifeboat (Figure 4) is an exceptional quilt, the 20-inch squares completely hand pieced and the calico oak-leaf crosses at the intersections of the 5½ muslin sash delicately appliqued. The five blue "oars" at each of the corners are pieced to four little tornado shaped funnels of white muslin, and the tiny red triangles to diamonds of muslin to form the "boats." A 5½-inch border of muslin all around makes the quilt's overall size 72 by 84 inches. The execution of the pattern is remarkable especially considering that Talula cut her own pattern pieces by the old quilt of her mother's. It is understandable she would want it quilted "nicely." For Talula that meant quilting it herself, although she had already begun taking quilts out to Mrs.



Fig. 4. *The Lifeboat*, c. 1935.

Brewer to have quilted for her.¹⁷ She seems to have considered this one a special challenge, as it to prove to herself she could yet do the fine quilting she had done when younger, and it is indeed a masterpiece.

Letters from winter, spring, and summer 1935 show Talula, now 73, alive to every personal, family and community event, every joyous sight and sound of returning spring and bountiful summer, with only an occasional, unspecified reference to her quilting. Though there is talk of having to “put our place up for sale, for if we miss one payment the Land Bank will take it,” Talula shows no alarm, and by October she has put the Lifeboat in her frame.

“I have to be very busy these days to get as much done on my quilt as I can before cold weather comes. I cannot go up to quilt when it is very cold; if I go up now will have to wrap up good. Have been wrapping the old overcoat around my



Fig. 5. *Lifeboat II*, c. 1936–1938.

feet and around my lap, tho will have more wrapping if I go up tomorrow I think. . . .¹⁸

Talula's quilting frame was set up in the big upstairs hall, 12 feet wide, probably designed for her frame when the house plans were drawn up by George, the brilliant son who died in a Georgia Army camp in 1918. The hall was hot in summer, cold in winter, for the only heat in the house was from the downstairs fireplaces and the kitchen stove, but Gilbert remembers she almost always had a quilt in her frame.

On October 12 in a letter to Mollie Ruth she wrote:

"I have been working hard on my quilting while the weather is nice. . . .

I have my quilt about half out I think. If so I can get it out in three more weeks if I keep well and weather is so nice so I can stay upstairs. It is very pretty and I am trying to quilt it

nice, tho my fingers get so very sore and my wrist and hands get so tired. But by time I rest them until Monday will be ready to go it again as fast as I can. Have already used over 300 yards of thread, that is of the white thread, though not much of the red, as I do not quilt much in the red."¹⁹

From these letters it appears that Talula quilted the Lifeboat in about six weeks and used more than 600 yards of thread, the red only to outline the oak-leaf crosses. On the quilt's lining are the badges of her victory, several small bloodstains and one so large she has tried to rinse it out. Pinned to the quilt is a note in Almira's writing, "The Lifeboat, made about 1936 for Mollie Ruth by Mother Talula Bottoms, and quilted by her."

Another Lifeboat (Figure 5) soon followed this first one, not quite so intricately pieced or quilted, but perhaps more striking with its solid red boats, blue oars, and pieced peach and blue sash emphasized with 9-patch squares at intersection points. It was made for Almira and remains in her Alabama home, with her youngest son's family who inherited both the quilt and the home.

Talula's Lifeboat will be recognized as a variation of an old pattern today called Whig's Defeat, an 1850 example of which appears in Safford and Bishop's book.²⁰ An earlier example and one more comparable to Talula's and from nearer her locale, is described by Bets Ramsey in Uncoverings 1980.²¹ She suggests in this article a relationship between the frugality of southern rural people, necessitated by harsh conditions after the Civil War, and a certain healing resourcefulness. Without doubt Talula's self-sufficiency was crucial in what appears to be the healing effect of her completion of the Lifeboat, and her chosen name for it is probably significant. Interviews and the exuberance reflected in many letters from this period, verify that from the mid-thirties until shortly before her death in 1946, her production was near incredible.

Talula would often have a dozen or more quilts in process, the pieces cut and kept in their individual Mars candy boxes which she had persuaded the proprietor of the traveling store, from whom she often bought material, to save for her. When a particular quilt she had made was so greatly admired, she would make two or three or six or eight more like it. Often she would let her granddaughters arrange the blocks on the big feather bed opposite the fireplace beside which she sat to piece her quilts. She kept many quilts and tops



Fig. 6. The Garden Bouquet, pieced and appliqued 1940 by Talula Bottoms, quilted 1984 by Mary Slabaugh of Conewango Valley, New York.

folded away in a big round-top trunk to give to nieces or grandchildren when they were married, to send to relatives when they were ill, or simply to give to friends, or neighbors, or anyone to reward them for some generous thing they had done. Three such quilts have been discovered in the Athens, Alabama area, where Talula and family moved in 1912, and it is possible many more could be found in Athens, Cullman County, and Fayette County areas, for more than one grandchild saw her simply give a quilt to someone who “fell in love” with it. In the late 30s she donated three quilts to be raffled to buy land for a community building because many people in the area had no place to worship.²²

Numerous letters from 1935 through 1945 show Talula not only working on several quilts at a time but making rugs, repotting porch and house plants every March, and growing yard and garden flowers so profuse and beautiful strangers would stop to admire and

photograph them. A few letters indicate she was being asked to make quilts on order for people as far away as West Virginia and New York, who had seen quilts that had migrated there with her children. Interviews verify that she did indeed during this time complete her goal of appliqueing little girl quilts for each of her 15 granddaughters, sometimes making them very special by sewing on "the buttons of Dad's baby dresses."²³

One of the quilts Talula continued to make throughout the 1930s was the Garden Bouquet (Figure 6), a Nancy Page design by Florence LaGanke which ran as a weekly series in the *Nashville Banner* February–July 1932.²⁴ One of the first Garden Bouquets Talula made was for Mollie Ruth; it is now with her nephew's family in Alabama. Its delicate appliqueed birds and flowers, its fine quilting outlining the patterned squares with the alternating plain squares quilted in a grid, and its unusual pieced urns and Greek key border, so pleased Talula and everyone who saw it that she set about to make one for each of her eight living children. She was still making these quilts in 1939 and possibly into the 40s, verified by a little rectangular template she had cut for the border from a postcard received from her older daughter.²⁵ Six Garden Bouquets have been found, four quilted by Talula and her two unquilted tops.

Talula had clipped and saved the complete series of patterns and instructions, twenty different flowers, two birds, the urns and the Greek key border. The brittle yellowed sheets were found after Almira's death in 1980. To each flower pattern Talula had pinned the little tissue paper templates she had cut for her own use; these are heavily perforated with pin holes, showing she had used them many times. Gilbert and Mayme inherited one of the later ones she made, an unquilted top. On it the hand stitching of the urn triangle half of the squares is of uneven quality and the Greek key border is unevenly pieced by sewing machine, attesting to the effects of aging on Talula's hands and eyes. That she would resolve to make eight of these quilts, with the delicate "laid work" so perfectly executed, is just one example of this little woman's great talent and generous heart.

One of the last quilts Talula mentions in her letters is Around the World. She completed the top in two weeks and "Papa likes it so much he wants to have it quilted and he keep it."²⁶ Other letters tell about her "curious spells" (one so severe she seemed gone for sure) but often end with, "but I can still do my quilt work," or "I may



Fig. 7. Thomas Jefferson and Talula Gilbert Bottoms, 1940, at their Athens, Alabama home. Photo courtesy George Bottoms.

make a good many quilts yet if I can keep my strength." A 1943 entry in her memoir says wistfully, "I sometimes wish I had them (her quilts) all here once more so I could see them."²⁷

Almost everyone interviewed remembers Talula sitting beside the fireplace piecing quilts in her little home-made straight-back chair cushioned with two or three pillows, her quilting closet nearby filled with bags and boxes of scraps, and new cloth, sometimes whole bolts, bought for her, mail ordered or bought "off the truck," as well as the boxes of cut pieces neatly arranged to lift off their little stacks. On warm days she would sit in her small rocking chair on the front porch, beside Tommie in his big one. She would have a Three Musketeers box on her lap, lifting off the little pieces with unbelievable speed and placing the finished squares in a basket beside her chair. While Tommie rocked and reminisced, or reflected on religion or the state of mankind, she would rock and sew, nodding in agreement and occasionally saying "Yes Tommie, you are absolutely right Tommie."²⁸ When company came, as it frequently did, she would get up and greet them warmly, make sure they were comfortable or fed, then sit again and sew while visiting. (Figure 7)

"She did not walk, she trotted about her work."²⁹ "She knew how to work without a wasted motion or a wasted moment,"³⁰ skills she

had no doubt had to learn as a child and young woman, if she were to have any time left to piece quilts. She moved about her work with quick little steps, humming old hymns, waiting on "Papa" and her grandchildren, all of whom she called Honey Dear.³¹ No one ever heard her raise her voice or complain. One granddaughter said, "I envisioned her as an earthly angel, she was so fragile, her voice soft, her face sweet and always smiling, even when she was in pain."³²

Reading all her letters chronologically, one is impressed with the life-giving quality of her joyous craft. On June 21, 1941, she wrote:

I started to be a little girl again yesterday . . . I was out of the kind of cloth I was using in the quilt I was working on. So I got out patterns of one I made when a little girl and started on it as I had scraps . . . It is now 5:30 and we are through in the kitchen, tho others are not up yet."³³

She must have felt very rich indeed in these later years, for her sharp mind and her hands twisted with arthritis continued to create, often in complex and difficult patterns, to the end of her life.³⁴ She was thus able to be generous with this wealth of her own hands until her peaceful death at age 84.

Notes and References:

1. Talula Gilbert Bottoms' Memoir written in 1943, p. 4. This memoir, *Autobiography of Talula Gilbert Bottoms*, was privately published with an introduction and notes by Nancilu B. Burdick, granddaughter (Orchard Park, New York, The Apple Press, 1983). Library of Congress No. TX 1-350-638. A copy of this handwritten memoir has been placed in the Margaret Mitchell Library, Fayetteville, GA.
2. Bottoms, pp. 105-106.
3. Bottoms, pp. 12-13.
4. Bottoms, pp. 42-43.
5. Bottoms, pp. 8-9.
6. Bottoms, p. 10.
7. Bottoms, pp. 14, 43.

8. Bottoms, p. 88.
9. Bottoms, p. 46. (Talula's Orange Bud proves elusive, although one like it made in Georgia in 1864 has been found in Fayetteville, GA. The granddaughter who inherited Talula's quilt died in 1979 and her seven children are widely scattered.)
10. Carleton L. Safford and Robert Bishop, *America's Quilts and Coverlets* (New York, E.P. Dutton, 1980) p. 161.
11. Talula gave this remarkable quilt to her granddaughter who fell in love with the Rocky Mountain in the 1930s, since the Rocky Mountain had already been promised to Almira, this quilt, date unknown, was its substitute, and is just as striking.
12. Letter Talula Bottoms to Mollie Ruth Bottoms, Dec. 11, 1940.
13. This quilt may have been bound with a sewing machine turned by hand. On pages 20 and 21 of her memoir Talula describes such a machine and says, "I used . . . that machine of theirs after we were married." The Feather and the Rocky Mountain appear to have been bound about the same time, possibly several years later than they were quilted (1892 and 1893). Among Talula's letters was found a receipt and guarantee for a Standard Sewing Machine (Cleveland, OH) "Sold to T.J. Bottoms on Nov. 9, 1895."
14. Mrs. A.P. Travers, "Grandmother's Quilts," *Southern Agriculturist*, June 1, 1928, p. 1 (loaned by Ruth B. Potts, Florence, AL).
15. Letter, Talula Bottoms to Mollie Ruth Bottoms, Oct. 9, 1940.
16. Letter, Talula Bottoms to Mollie Ruth Bottoms, Oct. 22, 1934.
17. Letter, Talula Bottoms to Mollie Ruth Bottoms, Feb. 3, 1935. (Mrs. A.I. Brewer of the Athens area did shell quilting for \$1.50 each, \$5.00 "by the piece," but she did not do the fine quilting Talula wanted.)
18. Letter, Talula Bottoms to Mollie Ruth Bottoms, Oct. 6, 1935.
19. Letter, Talula Bottoms to Mollie Ruth Bottoms, Oct. 12, 1935.
20. Safford and Bishop, p. 121.
21. Bets Ramsey, "Design Invention in Country Quilts of Tennessee and Georgia," *Uncoverings 1980*, (Mill Valley, CA, American Quilt Study Group, 1981) pp. 49-50.
22. Mrs. Gladie Coffman, telephone interview, Athens, AL, July 2, 1984. (Mrs. Coffman has a Bear Paw Talula gave her for helping with the raffle.)
23. Letter, Estelle Fernandez to Nancilu Burdick, June, 1984. The little girl quilts are Colonial Girl, Dutch Doll, and Sunbonnet Sue.
24. Florence LaGanke, "Nancy Page Quilt Club," the *Nashville Banner*, Feb.-July, 1932 (loaned by Ruth B. Potts).

25. Almira's postcard from which the heavily perforated template was cut, reports the death of her nephew's child "this morning." The child died in April, 1939. (Template found among Garden Bouquet clippings and patterns loaned by Ruth B. Potts.)
26. Letters, Talula Bottoms to Mollie Ruth Bottoms, May 17, 1941, and May 27, 1941.
27. Bottoms, p. 49.
28. Letter, Anna Swart to Nancilu Burdick, July, 1984; also telephone interview, Mary Wentworth. Anna and Mary lived in close proximity to their grandparents in the early 30s and from 1940 until Talula and Tommie died, 1946 and 1947.
29. Interview, Charles Bottoms, Little Genessee, NY, Sept., 1983.
30. Interview, Gilbert A. Bottoms, Sedro Wooley, WA, Nov., 1983.
31. Interview, Margaret Avery, Boulder City, NV, July, 1984.
32. Letter, Anna Swart to Nancilu Burdick, July, 1984.
33. Letter, Talula Bottoms to Mollie Ruth Bottoms, June, 1941.
34. Talula's granddaughter, Martha Hammack of Punta Gorda Isles, FL, inherited several of Talula's unfinished quilt tops and several boxes of her cut pieces, from her mother who had received them from Talula before her death. One star quilt, Talula had begun and Martha has just completed, has a large flower pieced to each star, its gathered petals filling up the center so that the star points look like arrowheads. The same pattern is called Dahlia in Dorothy Fager's *The Book of Sampler Quilts* (Radnor, PA, Childton Book Co.), 1983, p. 94.
 Among other quilts, the pieces cut, or tops unfinished, are Double Wedding Ring, Pilot's Wheel, Glittering Star and Improved Nine Patch. The last year or two of her life she made at least 15 quilt tops in "easier" patterns, hand pieced with larger pieces and longer stitches. Eight Grecian Star and seven Sunflower quilts made during this period have been found, both patterns of which require sewing of unusual shapes and curved pieces!