

Mary Vida Schafer



(1910-2006)

Quilt Maker and Historian

Inducted July 2007 at The Quilters Hall of Fame Celebration in Marion, Indiana

Quilt maker and quilt historian Mary Vida Schafer was born April 27, 1910, in Austria-Hungary, moving to the United States in 1915, the year Marie D. Webster published the first book solely dedicated to quilt history. Although her mother died soon after she arrived in America, Mary's education in the traditional needle arts that were so prominent in her homeland was not neglected. Her father saw to that by requesting help from the women in her neighborhood. Little did he know how greatly this careful training would one day impact her life. However, she was not exposed to quilting until she was some 40 years old. Her first attempt at quilt making was via a kit quilt, but her life-changing quilt experience came about while cleaning out the trunk of the family car in 1956 after a day at the beach where she discovered one very wet, sandy, red and white quilt. With the great respect with which she had always honored a woman's needlework efforts, Mary cleaned and repaired the sorry looking quilt in an attempt to save it. She then recreated the quilt, adding her own border design and her own quilting design. This seminal experience changed Mary's life. Though she did reproduce the once beautiful old quilt quite successfully, her curiosity piqued when she could not find the pattern in any readily available literature. She eventually gave her quilt the name "Linden Mill" after a near-by historical mill. Once ignited, her curiosity about traditional quilt patterns knew no bounds, thus launching the collecting and studying of anything about old historic quilts patterns she could get her hands on. In addition, she continued to make exquisitely crafted quilts to honor them as she had done with "Linden Mill". Mary subsequently pursued the history of each pattern at a time when very few were pursuing such history and when modern technology (fax machines, copy machines, e-mail, etc) was not available to lighten the load of such research. Like Cuesta Benberry (1983 QHF Honoree), Mary Schafer was an early participant in the quilt pattern Round Robins of the 1960s and soon subscribed to all the early quilt pattern "magazines" of the day: Glenna Boyd's Aunt Kate's Quilting Bee; Joy Carddock's 4J's; Claudine Moffat's the JB's; and Betty Flack's Little 'n Big. She also began a voluminous correspondence with many of the early pattern collectors and historians of the time, reinforcing her intent that her quilting be grounded in historical accuracy. In addition to the above mentioned women, Schafer corresponded with Betty Harned Harriman, Florence Peto (1980 QHF Honoree), Maxine Teele, Joyce Gross (1998 QHF Honoree), Lenice Bacon (1979 QHF Honoree), Barbara Bannister, Dolores Hinson, Patricia (formerly Almy) Randolph (founder and editor of Nimble Needle Treasures), and others. Schafer's quilting and the focus of her research went through many phases during her 40 some years at her self-imposed tasks. She deliberately brought her growing knowledge of quilt history to the reproduction of any pattern she undertook, thoroughly researching* the origins of each quilt genre before she began the actual quilting. Florence Peto wrote to Schafer in a letter dated 7 Feb 1968, "Do you know I have never seen another Lobster Quilt since the one pictured in Historic Quilts. I am happy to know you are keeping the design alive." Cuesta Benberry wrote in the Foreword to *Mary Schafer and Her Quilts* (Marston and Cunningham, 1990), "Her construction of a traditional quilt was more an act of conservation than of replication". Schafer occasionally added her own unique interpretation to a design without straying from the traditional look of the overall pattern. She put her own stamp upon the quilt by adding her own rendition of border designs, and always drafted her own original quilting designs with which the quilt was completed. Eventually, as her work picked up, like many quiltmakers of the time, Mary found other women to do the quilting of the completed top for her, but unlike some, kept well-documented records of who did the quilting for her. In 1965 Mary was greatly inspired by the written words of Marie Webster: "To raise in popular esteem the most worthy products of home industry; to add to the appreciation of their history and traditions, to give added interest to the hours of labor which their construction involves, to present a few of the old masterpieces to the quilters of today..." (*Quilts: Their Story and How to Make Them*, 1915), and took this as the inspiration for a self-imposed series of challenges in her own life, the first being "to make quilts as tributes to the women who had most inspired her in quilting," Ruth Finley's Clam Shell being the first (1967) of her many "tribute" quilts, followed by a series of patriotic quilts in the 1970s. In September 1970 Clam Shell won a blue ribbon for best pieced-quilt as well as "Popular Prize" [LCPQ #21] at the first National Quilting Association (NQA) quilt exhibit in Greenbelt, MD. The exposure garnered as a result of winning the two ribbons helped nudge Mary into a more public role, a role that would only grow with time as opportunities to speak and teach began to come her way. These same opportunities also influenced the direction of her quilting and her quilt collecting as she sought samples to use in her lectures.

In 1971 another challenge entered Mary's life when her long-time and very close friend Betty Harriman of Buneston, MO, died in July at age 81. Although the two women had never met face to face, their friendship had been deeply cemented by correspondence and phone calls for over a decade (Joe Cunningham, *Uncoverings* 1986, pg. 61). Mary, knowing that Betty's quilts would probably go to family members, approached Betty's sisters for the unfinished work in Betty's estate and for \$600 acquired numerous boxes of blocks, patterns, fabric, and quilt tops as well as voluminous amounts of the kind of paperwork that quilt archivists cherish: correspondence, fabric swatches, templates, sketches, notes, and plans for Betty's own many unfinished projects.

Schafer and Harriman had often researched the same quilt pattern, but each brought her own unique approach to the interpretation of the pattern. As Mary poured through these boxes of Betty's treasures, she made the decision to finish a number of Betty's quilts, feeling she was "capable of understanding Betty's quilting aesthetics and applying this to her friend's unfinished work." (*Mary Schafer and Her Quilts*, by Gwen Marston and Joe Cunningham; 1990, Michigan State University Press).

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Ten years later, in addition to all her own quilting and busy schedule, Mary had completed 14 of Betty's quilts, and would eventually go on to finish more. Meanwhile, in that same decade she completed her own series of Bi-Centennial quilts and continued working on her own project of reproducing outstanding and challenging quilt patterns from quilt makers who preceded her. It was about this time that she began to look into Amish quilts and explore the difference between the old and the new Amish-made quilts so that she could speak knowledgeably about them in her lectures. In as much as the price of authentically made old Amish quilts began to rise dramatically following the Holstein/van der Hoof exhibit at the Whitney Museum in New York in 1971, Mary was once again faced with the challenge of making her own samples.

Quilt literature, books, exhibits and contest continued to proliferate in the late 70s following the Bi-Centennial, which had kicked the late 60s quilt revival into high gear. Mary continued to enter and win contests, as well as dig into the research of traditional patterns. In *Nimble Needle Treasures*, Fall 1972, "100 years of the North Carolina Lily Courtesy of Mary Schafer, Flushing, Michigan" are variations of the North Carolina Lily pattern from the Schafer collection spanning over 100 years.

Soon after her exposure to Jinny Beyer's award winning 1977 quilt, *Ray of Light*, Mary added research on early 18th and 19th century medallion quilts and their reproduction to her schedule. Her research of this genre was a precursor of another aspect of the late 20th century quilt revival that would emerge in the quilt world in the late 90s as more and more reproduction antique fabrics were introduced into the quilt market place. Never one to be content with only one or two examples, Mary's exploration of this particular genre of quilt was also explored thoroughly via multiple medallion quilts of her own making.

In 1977 fate stepped in when Mary noticed a quilt-related article in the *Flint Journal* and contacted another quilter interested in traditional quilting featured in the article, Gwen Marston. Marston introduced Mary to Joe Cunningham and the two quickly took it upon themselves to introduce Mary Schafer to a wider quilt audience and the wider quilt world to Mary Schafer, beginning with a series of public exhibits of Mary's work in 1978 at the Robert E. Whaley historic house in Flint, MI. Quilt book author and lecturer Delores Hinson's review of Mary's quilting prowess in *QNM* Jan/1979, pg. 9 was succinct: "I have not seen any old quilts with better workmanship than Mary Schafer's in all of the thousands of quilts I have seen, studied and photographed...Her needlework is itself is flawless." With the first Whaley House exhibit, still another new chapter began in Mary's quilting life, and within two years Marston and Cunningham had documented Mary's collection and published a catalogue. (*QNM* Jan/84, pg 42)

With the assistance of Marston and Cunningham to handle exhibit planning and promotion, Mary was free to continue exploring new directions in her quilting. Once the Whaley exhibits began, Mary planned her quilting around the theme of the annual exhibit: 1980, heirloom quilts; 1981 whitework quilts; 1982 medallion quilts; and in 1983 her 6th and final Whaley House quilt exhibition of appliqué quilts. Mary's entire quilting to date had now been seen by the public, but that only meant more reason to explore new territory. As the result of the 1981 publication of Thomas K. Woodard and Blanche Greenstein's *Crib Quilts and Other Small Wonders*, Mary began exploring antique doll and crib quilts with all the enthusiasm she had explored every historic quilt genre to date and included a few in the 1982 Whaley House exhibit. By 1983 she had made 25 doll and crib quilts and exhibited all 25 in Flint, MI and again in Rochester, MI, her last major exhibits for three years. She would go on to make at least 20 more doll and crib quilts in the ensuing years. (Marston and Cunningham, pg. 54)

That same year, another noted quilt collector from Michigan, Merry Silber, presented Schafer with the idea of selecting some favorites quilts from Mary's antique quilt collection and exhibiting them side by side with Mary's own reproduction of the same quilt. By 1986 Mary had reproduced twenty-six quilts and exhibited them in tandem with the originals at the Birmingham-Bloomfield Art Association in Birmingham, MI, along with 30 quilt blocks Mary had made and given to Cuesta Benberry. At the opening of this event, the Michigan State Senate representative presented Mary with a proclamation honoring her for her contributions and dedication to the art and study of quilting in the state of Michigan and beyond.

In 1987 four of Mary's quilts were included in the Michigan Quilt Project's catalogue and accompanying exhibit, and, in that same year, Mary's manuscript *Q is for Quilt*, written in 1979, was donated to MQP as a fundraiser, and was subsequently published by the Michigan State University Museum (MSUM). In 1988 Mary was honored by the Michigan Women's Foundation, along with ten other women artists, for outstanding contributions to the arts. By the mid-1990s, MSUM was actively working with Mary to keep her entire collection of quilts and quilt ephemera in tact. With the generous support of the Ruth Mott Fund and numerous individuals and quilt groups, the core of Mary Schafer's collection was purchased for the Michigan State University Museum, where it resides today for quilt historians and quilt lovers to enjoy for generations to come.

by Karen B. Alexander

I am especially indebted to the published research of Gwen Marston. Gwen's second book about Mary -- "Mary Schafer; American Quilt Maker" University of Michigan Press, 2004 -- won Michigan Notable Book Award for literature in 2005 and is a must read. You may order it from The Quilters Hall of Fame by emailing quiltershalloffame@sbcglobal.net or calling 765-664-9333.

Sources for the above article:

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