

Stitches of Time

Written By Julie L. Thompson

In loving memory of and dedicated to Ethel S. Teague

I remember well the summer of my eighth year. Mid-June my younger brother and I were to spend two weeks on our grandparents' farm. Now, my grandparents were fine people and I liked visiting with them, but for two weeks? I kept wondering, "What will we do to pass the time?"

Let me explain. At that time, my brother and I lived with our parents in a city, and Grandma and Grandpa were farm people. They spent most of their time outdoors, from very early in the morning to just before dusk, tending the farm chores. The worst part was they had no television! And besides, they lived in the country, which meant there would be no one our ages nearby to play with. I couldn't imagine how this could possibly be a good situation!

The time came for us to pack and off we went. I had mixed feelings about the next 14 days. Like I said, my grandparents were great, but two weeks without friends and television? In my mind, this had disaster written all over it!

I have to admit that much to my surprise, the first few days were fun! Grandpa played checkers with my brother and Grandma taught me how to make homemade chocolate cake. She said the secret to making her chocolate icing taste so rich was to add a pinch of coffee granules to the mixture. I wondered how she came up with that idea, but once I was allowed to sample from the beaters, the delicious taste made me forget all about trying to figure that out.

One morning my brother, David, rode off with Grandpa on the tractor and I stayed behind. Grandma was busy in the kitchen so I set off exploring on my own. My grandparents' house was fascinating! It was also very old. As a matter of fact, my grandfather's grandfather lived there many, many years ago. Every room had a fireplace. Back when the house was first built in the late 1800's, fireplaces were used to provide heat. There seemed to be sets of secret stairs leading to many interesting places throughout the house. Eventually I found my way through a door off the kitchen and up 15 wooden stairs the color of coal. They led me to an enormous dark storage room. I nervously flicked on the first light I came to. I couldn't

believe all the old things that lay before me! There was an old baby carriage, the clarinet my daddy played when he was a boy, and other items that I learned later represented our family history.

As I was reaching overhead to pull the string to turn out the light, I spotted something interesting in the far corner. It was next to the window that peered out over Grandma's favorite fig tree offering shade to the south side of the house. I decided to take a closer look.

I wound my way over; carefully managing my steps to keep from disturbing the treasures I passed. I gently ran my hands over the most beautiful quilt I'd ever seen. I was so intrigued that I didn't hear my grandmother's tender footsteps making their way in my direction.

As gently as I laid my hands on the quilt, my grandmother laid her hands on my shoulders and asked if I'd like to hear the stories this quilt had to tell. "This quilt tells stories?" I asked.

I followed, as my grandmother gingerly carried the quilt to an upstairs bedroom where she draped it over a mahogany feather bed. I helped with great expectations of hearing the stories this quilt had to tell.

She said this was a special quilt because it told of events that were important to her family. She called it her heritage quilt. It had been a gift from her mother just before she died. I knew right away that my grandmother cherished this gift and was delighted to share these stories with me. So, I listened eagerly as she began featuring different blocks of the quilt and narrating the story that was woven into each.

(Display transparency of Quilt Block #1.)

The first block she admired was made of a swatch of cotton fabric that had been dyed with the juice from wild berries. Grandma said it was once part of the first quilt she made as a young girl. She explained that when she was about my age, her mother taught her to sew. She made quilts and clothes for her dolls. She told me she strained her eyes from sewing so much that at age 10, she was fitted for her first pair of glasses. I gathered that long ago, before the invention of sewing machines, mothers taught their daughters the craft of sewing.

(Display transparency of Quilt Block #2.)

She continued by saying that family was very important back when she was growing up. "Family members depended on each other," she said. They lived together, played together, and worked together, too! They raised food and other crops to take to the market to sell or trade. She said it took each member of the family to keep things going. This is when she showed me the next block sewn in the quilt. It included a swatch of material portraying family members harvesting tobacco. Grandma explained that this block represented one Thanksgiving she remembered well. It seemed that Thanksgivings were usually quiet family affairs, but this particular year it was spoiled because they had to harvest the tobacco crop. Raising and selling tobacco was one way her family made a living. Although they wanted to enjoy a big meal and fellowship with family, they couldn't afford to let the tobacco waste. Grandma called this sacrificing.

(Display transparency of Quilt Block #3.)

While on the subject of family traditions and special occasions, she drew my attention to the quilt block that pictured a young girl collecting wildflowers in a basket. She told me that when she was a little girl she and her brothers made nests out of flowers for the Easter Bunny to leave eggs in. "The Easter Bunny sure has been around for a long time," I thought to myself.

(Display transparency of Quilt Block #4.)

Then I noticed a block that pictured a watermelon and a heart placed between a man and a woman. I asked my grandmother what that block represented. She told me how her mother met her father while he was selling watermelons at the market. She won his affections by saving the seeds for him to replant the next growing season. They were married October 20, 1904. She went on to say that this block showed how her parents met, as well as how people conserved and replenished natural resources.

(Display transparency of Quilt Block #5.)

Next, Grandma told me about her favorite doll she had as a little girl. The doll was Elizabeth. She showed me the block of the quilt that was stitched in her honor. This block was made from one of the first dresses Grandma made for Elizabeth. As it turns out, the material she used to make this dress was once part of a blanket Grandma had when she was a baby.

(Display transparency of Quilt Block #6.)

As my attention wandered from one block to the next, I noticed a particularly stunning section made from an emerald green material. The color and details of the fabric were so rich. I was drawn in as my grandmother told me it was taken from the dress she wore when she and my grandfather were married August 16, 1936. As she described the event, I could almost see her standing in the church, eyes sparkling like the rhinestones she described that adorned her dress.

I began to realize that each block of this quilt had very special meaning, and the stories that each told were leading me through the history of my grandmother's life.

(Display transparency of Quilt Block #7.)

I was especially interested in a section that reminded me of a soldier's uniform. The look and feel was very different. Grandma told me the story. It seems her grandfather, who was injured during the Civil War, wore the uniform from which this material was taken. He died at an early age due to his injury. Later, my grandfather was excused from serving in World War II because he had a family and also because he was raising food which was essential.

(Display transparency of Quilt Block #8.)

The softest block of the quilt featured a piece of material taken from one of my grandmother's bonnets. Grandma said when she was young; she swept the family's dirt yard with a "brush" broom made of leftover materials from weaving baskets. She wore a bonnet to shade herself from the pelting rays of the sun. I questioned why they swept dirt yards, but I guess that was a different story.

(Display transparency of Quilt Block #9.)

Remember when I wondered about how my grandmother got the idea of adding a pinch of coffee granules to her chocolate icing mixture? Well, there was a block of the quilt that answered my intrigue. Grandma knew I was curious to hear this story. This quilt block was stitched from a pocket of her mother's kitchen apron. She said the morning of the day her mother planned to bake a cake, as she ground fresh beans for the coffee, she would empty the leftover granules into her apron pocket, for none was to be wasted. Later, as she made the cake she would remember the granules and pinch as much as she could into the icing mixture. I knelt down in hopes of taking in a lingering hint of those coffee granules. I almost thought I could smell the aroma!

There were other quilt blocks left for later discussion. Grandma had chores to tend and I offered to help. I wanted time for my grandmother to teach me the art of quilting.

As it turned out, the next several days went quickly, and before I knew it, two weeks had passed. Two weeks just wasn't long enough! This was indeed a memorable summer for me. I felt as though I had traveled back in time through this beautiful work of art that was fashioned out of remnants from the past. This quilt was a symbol of important events in the history of my family.

Today this quilt lies at the foot of the mahogany feather bed that was passed down to me by my loving grandmother. The material warms my body as the memories stitched into each piece of fabric warm my heart.