

**The Folk Art of Quilting**

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Intro to Folklore

### The Folk Art of Quilting

Quilting is the process of putting together three layers of fabric by stitching them together. Two methods of making quilts are piecing and applique. In piecing a quilt, small pieces of fabric are sewed together to form a pattern. The applique style involves cut out designs that are sewed on the top of the quilt. The middle layer of fabric in a quilt provides the insulation and the stitching holds it in place. The quilt is usually made to be used as a bed covering but can also be used for the warm linings of winter clothes. This art has been around for thousands of years, passed on from generation to generation.

From Ida Crase, my informant, I hoped to find out how and why she still makes quilts. I expected that my informant participated in quilting, not only because it gave her something to do, but also because she truly enjoyed it. I also expected to find that she favored making quilts by hand.

In gathering the information for this project a taped interview was given at the informant's church. She also gave me a copy of a handwritten description of old-time quilting that she had written for me. Several pictures were taken of quilts being quilted on round and square frames. The informant was very knowledgeable and proved to be a good source for information on quilting.

My informant, Ida Crase, is a seventy-seven year old retired school teacher. She grew up in Letcher County and

moved to Somerset in 1976. She has been quilting since she was about thirteen years old. Mrs. Crase learned to quilt from her mother by taking the pieces her mother could not use and sewing them together to make doll quilts. She helped organize the Cricket Quilting Club in 1979.

The interview went fairly well. I may not have followed up some of her responses with good questions, though. If I could do the interview over again, I would focus more on one aspect of quilting; such as the making of the quilt or on the patterns and designs of the quilt. I believe that if any information was withheld it was because I just did not ask the right questions. There is a very good rapport between us. She was very happy to help me with this project. For the trouble I put her through, I sent her a big, green house plant and expressed my appreciation on a card. I am told that she was pleased with the gift.

Mrs. Crase makes many quilts by hand using simple wooden frames to attach the quilt to as she works on it. First the lining is layed down, then the padding, and finally the topping. The topping is usually pieced from small squares into some pleasing design. The lining and top are stretched tightly on the frame. The top is then marked for quilting a certain pattern. These lines are then sewn all over the quilt through the three layers. When the quilt is finished, it is taken out of the frame and the edges are trimmed. The quilt is then fastened with a strong material

around the edges. The time required to make a quilt in this way is extraordinary.

It takes many, many hours to make a quilt, depending, of course, on the size of the quilt. I have spent as much as two and a half months on quilting just one quilt. Of Course, -it- I didn't spend all of my time at it. That's why quilts are so precious, much time is involved. I'd say two or three hundred hours on most quilts.

Anything taking this long to make would have to be dear to the person making it. Ida Crase says, "I love my quilts, if they could talk they'd each have a story to tell."

Quilting has been done for many years by hand. Now with all of the blankets and things being produced so quickly by machines, one wonders why someone would still practice quilting by hand. When asked Mrs. Crase's reply involved necessity, joy, gifts, and money.

When I was raising my family I quilted for necessity. I had five children and it took a lot of quilts to keep the beds warm in winter . . . But now I quilted for pleasure, the joy of being able to create something beautiful. It is a good therapy for older people who may otherwise be lonely and feel useless.

She also said that giving one of her quilts as a gift would let the person know that she loved them or she wouldn't have spent all of that time in making their quilt. Mrs. Crase makes her quilts mainly for family members and other people who are special to her.

For one daughter who works in the field of music and plays for the church. I've put a church in the center with music instruments quilted in. I quilted music lines and spaces. For the other daughter who was born in a log cabin in the

mountains, I put a log cabin in the center, quilted in an old barn, a country church, an a schoolhouse and outhouse. I called it the Mountain Heritage Quilt. I made special quilts for each son.

She said that she sold very few quilts.

Quilting exhibits several folk characteristics. It is usually informally learned and is passed on from generation to generation. Mrs. Crase learned from her mother and passed on her knowledge to her daughter and the members of her quilting club. The structure of quilting is not very rigid. There are many different patterns and new ones are being created all of the time. The practice of making quilts has a lot of meaning to those who participate in the making and receiving quilts. The way in which the quilts are made is still pretty much the same as it was a long time ago. The processes the quilt goes through have changed little over the years.

My focus was successful. I learned how and why quilts are made. If I could take a different approach on the topic, I would probably concentrate on the Cricket Quilting Club as a whole. There are probably many stories that accompany some of the quilts that they have made. In conducting this project I learned a deeper respect for the people who participate in quilting the old way. They dedicate a lot of time to the making of these quilts. Instead of selling them or keeping them they give them to the ones they care for. I only wish I could give a gift that had such meaning. I can see why Mrs. Crase says, "if I was buying a quilt I'd pay

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"... much, much more for the handmade ones."