



Maren Larsen

Quiltmaker's Story

7/23/2009

San Francisco, CA

Interviewer: Jean Low, SFQG Historian

JL: Tell us a little bit about your education,

Maren: I have lived in San Francisco since 1976 but I was raised in San Jose California. I'm married and have two children, a son and a daughter, my son is currently 15 and my daughter is 12. I work as a teacher at Lawton Elementary School.

As far as formal education I have an AA in design from the Fashion Institute of Design, which is located in San Francisco and Los Angeles. I graduated from Los Angeles. I worked for a while as a pattern maker, and did quilting for people who wanted custom work done. I also worked as a social worker for many years, and then I went back to school and got a degree in child development and a teaching credential. And that's what got me to teaching, but you can see that the sewing was a big part of my life. What I originally wanted to be when I was in high school was a theatrical costumer. There's not a lot of steady work in that, but I did get the training and the background and I did work for a couple of years as a pattern maker for clothing.

JL: So did you start early with your interest in textiles?

Maren: Well, yeah, actually the family kind of laughs when they tell this story. When I was still a toddler sleeping in a crib, I loved to do puzzles, and after I'd done them I would turn them over and do them upside down, because I thought they were more interesting that way. My parents used to say that I was the entertainment for their bridge club. They would wake me up sometimes and have me do a puzzle because I could do it

Maren Larsen, Quiltmaker Story

pretty fast. I think that relates, because I think a lot of patchwork is figuring out the relationships of the different lines and shapes and colors.

This was in the 50's, and in an effort to save money, my mother, who had four daughters, began to sew our clothes. In those days it was cheaper to sew than to buy clothes, though now I think it's cheaper to buy things at Target. And then there's not much you can make out of the scraps from little girls' dresses, even doll clothes take more fabric than people realize, so I used to take scotch tape and tape the scraps together to make fabric, and then make clothes, and then I'd actually wear it, which was very embarrassing to my older sister, and I'd wear it and go out to play, and then they'd fall apart while I was playing. So that was my beginning of working with fabric. I always liked fabric.

And then I started sewing clothing when I was about ten, just sort of from watching my mother. I can't remember her ever sitting down and teaching me, but I would go and watch her while she was sewing. I remember the first thing I wore in public that my sister wasn't embarrassed by was a yellow corduroy skirt. Of course corduroy has a nap, so why I picked corduroy I don't know, but it was a yellow corduroy skirt and it had a zipper, and a waistband, and a button with a buttonhole, and it had this box pleat ruffle around the bottom. I think I was 10 or 11 when I had that, because I think it was fifth grade.

JL: Where did you learn your sewing skills? Did you watch your mother?

Maren: Yeah. And she had this big old Viking that was cast iron, it must have weighed about 1,000 pounds. I would have liked to keep it, but she threw it away when she moved to the east coast, and I didn't know she was going to throw it away. I was away at college, and if I had known she was going to throw it away, I'd have asked her for it. That's what I learned to sew on. It had straight stitch, zigzag, and that was it.

And so then once she realized I could sew, she did it to save money but I did it because I liked it, so she said okay, now you're going to sew all the clothes in the family. So we would go to the fabric store, my sisters would pick out what patterns they wanted for their clothes, and then she would let them pick out fabric, and then bring it home and I'd sew it. Sew I made clothes for everyone except my father, all my sisters and my mother and myself. Starting when I was about twelve. Halloween costumes, and bathing suits, and dresses, and long maxi dresses were in, so when I got to middle school where girls take sewing class, I told them I didn't want to take sewing because I already knew how to sew. They said girls have to take sewing. I told them I wanted to take either auto mechanics or wood shop because I thought those would be more helpful. And they said no, girls have to take sewing and cooking.

In the sewing class, I was a little shy and didn't want to say anything, but a friend of mine who also knew how to sew went to the teacher and said, we two already know how to sew. And the teacher said, "Well, you think you do, but you don't". So we said, "If we can make a bathing suit, will you let us out of the class?" She said, "Okay." So we went out and got the pattern, and the stretch fabric, and the tricot lining, and we each made a

Maren Larsen, Quiltmaker Story

bathing suit, and I have to give her a lot of credit, she stuck to her word. We had to attend the class because it was a time in the schedule, but she allowed us to sew whatever we wanted. So that was nice, though I don't remember her ever even coming over and critiquing us.

Quilting, I probably started sewing patchwork when I was in high school. By then we had quite a collection of scraps. The first quilt I made, I took an old sheet, and I took scraps and I hand sewed them onto the sheet, and I kept sewing until the whole sheet was covered.

JL: Now, did you know about quilts? I mean, how did you know to do patchwork?

Maren: I graduated from high school in 1974. In the late '60s and early 70s, the hippies were putting patches on their jeans, and patchwork was around, though not necessarily quilts. We had a couch, my parents got divorced, and money was pretty tight for us, and my mother was pretty radical, so she went and bought a big bag of leather pieces and some super glue, and we just glued those leather pieces all over the back of the couch. It looked like patchwork. And then I think I covered the cushions with corduroy again, and so we had like this patchwork sofa, which all my friends thought was really cool. Again, my older sister was horrified, she always wanted the neat house with the white sofa, and her taste never did mesh with the family's lifestyle. She got a white sofa when she got married, so she finally got what she wanted.

The idea of patchwork and quilts, it was kind of organic and in the air at that time, you know? And my other sister when I made my quilt, she made one too. And I put a blanket on the back and tied it. I still have it, it's pretty.....gross. I mean it had flour sacks, and polyester, and whatever was around.

JL: Would you call that your first quilt?

Maren: Yeah.

JL: When was the next quilt you made?

Maren: Would have been right after that, and I made a log cabin.

JL: What kind of machine?

Maren: My mother's Viking. It was yellow and brown. Everything hand done with scissors, my mother had these huge shears. I know I made a lot of log cabin quilts for wedding gifts, double size. The first fabric I ever bought for myself was from Mervyn's. 100% cotton, 50 cents a yard. I got the pattern from a book. We went to the library every Saturday from the time we were toddlers.

JL: So you made the transition from polyester to cotton.

Maren Larsen, Quiltmaker Story

Maren: Yes, I think that was pretty early. I think it was because I liked the feel of cotton better, but you couldn't always get good quality with 100%, you usually got better quality with cotton blends. I think I still used corduroy for several more quilts, until I realized that made it hard. The nap made it hard to sew, and there were no walking feet.

JL: Do you have any favorite quilt patterns?

Maren: Yeah, I lean toward ones with more intricate piecing, that's what I tend to. I've done appliquéd, I like appliquéd, but I don't do a lot of it myself. I do a lot of piecing. What I'm working on right now is a Bear Paw that my husband requested. It's yellow and green, and I made a duck's foot in the mud/cross and crown quilt in yellow and green for my sister when she went off to college, and my husband has been asking for years "Would you make one of those for us?" I know that one has lime green gingham sashing and I don't want that in my bedroom. So I told him I'd make him a yellow and green quilt, but I didn't say it would be lime green, and instead of a cross and crown I changed it to a Bear's Paw. I like feathered star, I like more scrap quilts than those with only a few fabrics.

JL: Do you tend to make large bed quilts?

Maren: I've done everything from baby size to the biggest I've ever done was a King size and I don't want to do that again. It's too big for my machine and my shoulders. Most of them are good size doubles, and I've done a lot of twins and a lot of babies.

JL: And the quilting, how's that gone?

Maren: When I first started out, they were all tied. I've done some hand quilted, maybe ten. Then more recently in the last ten years I'm machine quilting. I'm not a fancy machine quilter, I'm just a stitch-in-the-ditch or stipple, I don't have fancy designs, that's what I'd like to get better at.

JL: Have you ever used quilt making to help you through a difficult time in your life?

Maren: I sew every single day. I get up at about 5 in the morning, to get in an hour, an hour and a half of sewing before my children get up. What I really miss being in San Francisco is being with my sisters. I have three sisters and two of them are quilters. When we were in high school, we used to get together and have our own little quilt retreat in the sewing room at home. We'd stack up the records on the record player, and we'd each have our own sewing project, and we could work together, each on her own project, for a whole week vacation from school. But now that I have one sister in San Jose and one in New Jersey, we sometimes say we wish we could get together and sew. The fourth sister doesn't sew or do any kind of craft. If we are all together on a trip, it drives her crazy the way the rest of us want to go to all the fabric shops!

Maren Larsen, Quiltmaker Story

Now if we visit each other, we go through each other's stashes, folding and refolding and cutting off a bit of things our sister likes. I go back to New Jersey to buy Civil War reproductions, and then the New Jersey sister comes here to buy Hoffmans and Batiks.

JL: In terms of the quilts you make, are they traditional, or modern designs?

Maren: I think people would say they were traditional. For me the most fun part is picking out the colors and the piecing. I was thinking as I was preparing for this that I have an AA in design but I have never taken a course in color theory. There were different tracks in the school and I was in the one that was geared toward pattern drafting. It's interesting they didn't teach us any color theory. Although I have a pretty good color memory, in other words, I can go to the store, and even if I don't have swatches, I can look at a fabric and say, "This is going to go," or "This isn't going to go." I am usually right.

JL: Do you buy fabric for a project, or because you need it?

Maren: I buy it because I like it, and I have a fairly extensive collection.

JL: How much fabric do you buy?

Maren: I used to buy 2 or 3 yards if I liked it, and then I cut back to a yard, then a half, then a third of a yard. Unless it's already a fat quarter, pretty frequently I'll buy a third of a yard because that's 12 inches, and you can use it so many different ways.

JL: How much fabric do you have?

Maren: It takes up pretty much an entire room. It's in the basement, in boxes, sorted by color, and certain themes like novelties, ocean, civil war, etc.

JL: What kind of storage unit do you use?

Maren: The stuff I'm using frequently is in clear plastic bins; the stuff I use less frequently is in cardboard file boxes in the basement. I really probably shouldn't buy any more fabric, but it is an addiction. I never smoked, I never went into the drug scene, but the fabric gives me pleasure. My husband says I get pleasure out of it even when I'm not sewing. I'll go in and sort out my greens, say, when I don't have the energy to start a quilt.

JL: What's your routine when you come home with a new piece?

Maren: I always wash. I want everything to be washed and ready to use when I want it. The only exception is if I want a quilt to have that old fashioned puckery look, and I might not pre-shrink the backing, so it'll shrink when the finished quilt is washed.

Maren Larsen, Quiltmaker Story

Sometimes I will right away after pre-shrinking cut off a 3" strip and cut it into 3" squares, or cut other size squares or strips and put them in bins. I find the 3" square is the best to work with children at my schools making quilts.

JL: How long have you been making quilts with the kids at Lawton and what age group are you working with?

Maren: I've been working with the children there since before I was a teacher, when I was doing it as a parent volunteer. I've worked with as young as kindergarten. The ones where we taught them to use the sewing machine were 4th and 5th graders. What we did is we taught them to sew first on paper, then on fabric, and we made quilts that we donated to UC medical center. They made baby quilts, which they backed and tied. That was a lot of fun, but they didn't want to give them away. I'd like to do that again, but right now I'm in a classroom, so there's no time to teach them. But I try to take one unit every year that they're studying and interpret it into fabric. For example, geometric shapes and rotational symmetry. They all like the fabric, they'll try to take the little squares home in their pockets. When I was teaching sewing, a lot of the Chinese grandparents would come in and hang around. They would say they appreciated that someone was teaching their grandchildren to sew, and one woman said her grandson had asked for a sewing machine for Christmas! Now the grandchildren can sew with the grandparents when they come over while parents are at work.

JL: Do you decorate your house with quilts or do other people give you quilts?

Maren: I've gotten baby quilts for Heather; we have quilts on all the beds and on the sofa, but not on the wall.

JL: Do you trade blocks?

Maren: I draft blocks for others, but I can draft any block I want myself. I do like working on group projects.

JL: How about groups?

Maren: I'm in a sewing circle, and a smaller group working on a wedding quilt for Martha Schwartz' daughter. I am also in "5 Easy Piecers", which now has 9 members; probably 7 of them have been together for 10 years, though some of us have been together for 20. Most people will bring a project most months to work on. The place rotates, and the hostess provides dessert.

JL: Have you taken quilting classes?

Maren: I started quilting in the '70s, and there weren't many classes offered. I've attended classes at QuiltAway. I did sign up for a class with a well-known Bay Area quilter when I first moved here but I didn't like it so I dropped out.

Maren Larsen, Quiltmaker Story

I was recording secretary for the Guild.

JL: Do you enter quilts in shows?

Maren: That isn't my motivation for making them, but I have had quilts in our own shows. 5 or 6 of the quilts I made with the children at Lawton School are usually hanging up in the school, but they have been taken down for the remodel. The students love to come in and see them.

JL: Have you received ribbons or awards for your quilts?

Maren: I received an honorable mention and two second places, one Civil War repro and one Kaffe Fassett style.

JL: Have you written articles or designed patterns?

Maren: No articles. I designed appliqués, for personal use.

JL: How many quilts have you made?

Maren: Over 250.

JL: Have you worked on Guild opportunity quilts?

Maren: Yes, several. I've also spent two years as Recording Secretary of the Guild.

JL: What do you enjoy about our Guild?

Maren: Camaraderie, Show and Tell. They are as funny and entertaining as the guests, sometimes.

JL: Advice for future quiltmakers?

Maren: Just try it. Keep going. Don't expect perfection. Keep going. That's how you get better. Don't hesitate. Just keep doing it.

###