

Lawson, Jurline  
Quiltmaker Story, April 1, 2008



Interviewee: Jurline Powell Lawson (J)  
Quiltmaker Story Interview: April 1, 2008, 10:15 AM -10:50AM  
San Francisco, CA.  
Interviewer: Jeanie Low, CHQP, SFQG (Q)  
Transcriptionist: Jeanie Low April 3, 2008

Q: So Jurline, where did you grow up?

J: I grew up in San Francisco. I came here when I was five years old. I started my early schooling at Raphael Weil Elementary School, between O'Farrell and Buchanan, went to the Girl's High School, Geary and Scott, which no longer exists. Graduated from Galileo High School, and went to City College, gone to San Francisco State College. Did not finish state college. We lived in the Fillmore part, which is now the Lower Pacific Heights, and it has become yuppyville. [she laughs].

Q: Now, where is your family originally from? Where were you born?

J: I was born in Arkansas, and my family was originally from there. My father came out here during the war (WWII) to work and once he got here, he said he was always going to keep concrete under his feet. He worked here for a short while and then he sent for my Mother and myself. We came out here and have been out here ever since.

Q: Do you have any siblings?

J: I have no siblings. I'm an only child. When I started quilting, someone said to me "but Jurline, you're a loner. You do not work with other people or associate with other people." I said, "Well, now that I'm retired, I'm doing it."

Q: So now, what kind of work were you involved in, what's your occupation?

J: I worked for the Dept. of Social Services for 32 years. I was a senior supervisor in the Food Stamp Program, and in '92 the voters passed a measure that gave us early retirement, so I took it and ran and never looked back.

Q: Ha. Ha. You talked about your early learning how to quilt from Charles Rose?

J: No. It was Charles Ross.

Lawson, Jurline  
Quiltmaker Story, April 1, 2008

Q: How often did you take lessons from him?

J: Oh, I just took lessons from Charles for two months. Whenever I had a problem, I could call and always run by his house and see him. We were both working at that time. The quilt that he set up for me was a Log Cabin. So, it was fairly straight forward, but the thing was that the quilting, and also the way he had set it up on the diagonal that I had small problems with that I went back. But that was in preparation for my retirement. So that was that.

Q: So was this [quilt] machine or handquilted?

J: It was handquilted.

Q: Did you finish the project? And how large was it?

J: Yea. I finished the project. (1981) It's for a double bed. And it makes a beautiful pattern. It forms two diagonal squares. I'll bring it one time for you to see.

Q: Why don't you bring it to Tuesday [Caroline Lieberman's quilt] class.

J: Yes, I'll bring it to class next Tuesday.

Q: Oh that would be nice. It'll be nice watching the progression of the first quilt. Wow, that's a double [bed] size!

J: Yes. His thing was, he always used scraps. Since he was at the Emporium or wherever they used for displays. So, if he walked down the street and he saw scraps, he'd pick them up. What I used at the time were scraps because I had a neighbor and he was a cutter in the garment industry and he had brought me a large bag of cotton scraps. So, I was trying to use those up.

Q: Ah, were there other events that influenced the direction of your life? How did you decide to go into social work?

J: No. I applied for a job at the recruiting station. I first started out working for the federal government, and the gentleman was so nice - the captain came out, and he hired me because I had on gloves and a hat. [she laughs] He chose the people that I saw.

Q: What year was this when you started?

J: '62, no let me think. I think it was '57 or something like that. Anyway, I started out working for the federal government. Then, I worked for the state. Then, I went to work for the city. When I started out, there was nothing like it is now. We were at 585 Bush St., which is now a garage. [she laughs]. Then naturally, we didn't have all the social problems then.

Q: Did you have a diverse group of clients you worked with?

J: When I started out, I worked as a clerk typist and worked my way up. In the early days, the clients were like, I don't know [pause] in my day, they [clients] were like - you didn't ask for assistance. When I left they [clients] were demanding it, it was their right. When I left, we were working with armed guards.

Q: Aha, oh, I see.

Lawson, Jurline  
Quiltmaker Story, April 1, 2008

J: You know, you had armed guards on every floor and this sort of thing. In the old days, nobody would think of you know -if someone was going to help them and that you were going to harm them. I don't know. Things just changed, and it was good to get out.

Q: Well, in terms of quilting or sewing, anyone in your family sew or quilt?

J: My Mother sewed because we didn't have any money. It was the war [WWII] and everything was rationed. So, she made clothes for me and then, I made my dolls clothes. And whatever.

Q: Well, is your Mom self-taught?

J: My Mom was self-taught. I'm not going to say self-taught. I'm going to say it was a gift because it [her skill] enabled us to survive and for me to have clothing that I normally wouldn't have had.

Q: You talked about [her skill] when she saw something?

J: She could see someone walking down the street and see someone wearing something and she would say, "Oh, I like that." She could come home, and she'd have looked at it real good, and she'd get some newspaper and cut out her pattern and make it!

Q: And your Dad, what occupation was he in?

J: My Dad was a carpenter. And, the one thing that they did that I could appreciate. My Dad worked at night, so he was home with me during the day. My Mother worked during the day.

Q: Did you Dad work at the shipyard?

J: Yes. Everyone worked at the shipyard during the war [WWII].

Q: Yeah, my Dad was a carpenter at the shipyards also.

J: Yes. That's where the money was! That's where black people could get hired. That was part of the problem too. He took the ferry over to Richmond.

Q: Oh, was that during the war?

J: Yea.

Q: So, he probably got a deferment [from serving in the military]?

J: Yes.

Q: Was he building warships?

J: I don't know. He never talked about it. So, I can only assume that it had to be something that they weren't supposed to talk about. Because then he might be asked about other questions or whatever. My Mother had a brother to come out first and he came out, got a room, got a job. Then, he wrote and told my Father, sent him money for a ticket. And my Father came.

Q: You know, our Dads could have worked next to each other!

J: That is true!

Lawson, Jurline  
Quiltmaker Story, April 1, 2008

Q: Because my Dad worked as a welder apprentice, then he switched into carpentry.

J: Okay. Then my Mother did some welding too. Because women, there were no men there except the few. So, they [women] had to do everything, but it was interesting after the war, her brothers, one of her brothers went back. My Mother never went back to Arkansas. My Father [did] because his parents were there. He had two brothers here; one brother was in the service. When his parents got sick, they went back every year.

Q: Jurline, what kinds of quilts do you like to make?

J: Okay. I'm not a quilter in the true sense. I like to learn new processes and the latest that is out there. I will start something to learn the process and then hang it in the closet once I've learned the process. [Then] move on to learn another process. As of now, I have one, two, two quilts that are completed. No, three quilts that are completed. 1,2,3,4,5. Five that are in process, almost complete and I have the parts, where I have learnt the processes, I have just made one block. They're all in boxes. Nothing [of those are] completed, but you know, the learning process was there for me.

Q: Who were your teachers?

J: Caroline Lieberman has been my only teacher except for Charles Ross. I went to take an applique case from Elly Sienkiewicz. When she was here one time down where was he before in Sunnyvale? [Mountain View] I'm trying to think of the quilting shop, I can see my chemobrain has kicked in. He's moved to Sunnyvale now.

Q: Oh, Eddie's.

J: Oh yea, Eddie's Quilting Bee. That was when Mama (Diana Leone) still had the shop.

Q: Now, what kinds of fabrics do you like to use?

J: I like to use any kind of fabrics that will give me the realistic approach for flowers. I use some batiks, but I also use some graded fabrics and whatever. I do a lot of cutting to get the exact grading that I want in my fabric. I waste a lot of fabric. I'm mostly into flowers. I love flowers, and embellishing them. So that's my one love.

Q: Yea, tell me about that Baltimore Album that you just finished.

J: That was started learning the process in Caroline Lieberman's class. She offered an applique class. I was one of her first students over there. We were making 7" blocks. I was thinking, "Gee, that's a lot of work for 7" blocks", but after I learnt how to do some of the process, then I stopped the 7" blocks. Then, I saw Elly Sienkiewicz and her blocks were bigger and beautiful. So then, I started the true Baltimore Album, making the flowers and truly enjoyed every moment of that.

Q: Great! Now, you're working on the 7" blocks?

J: Yes. Now, but I've put sashing on there that makes it much bigger, and I'm working on quilting and getting the ones I've completed together into a wallhanging 'cuz Baltimore Albums should not be quilts when they're so fancy. They need to be wallhangings because there's not a possibility of laundering there. So, therefore, they need to be hung on a wall where they can be admired.

Q: That's the ticket! Do you make quilts for family, yourself, celebrating event, anything?

Lawson, Jurline  
Quiltmaker Story, April 1, 2008

J: How could I? [she laughs] When I'm not in the process of not finishing them! No, I just make them for me. I make parts of quilts, and if I get carried away - like right now - I have to finish everything I have. Hopefully, I will not start anything new.

Q: Well, do you decorate your house with quilts?

J: No.

Q: Do you collect quilts that others have made?

J: No. I have two quilts from when my grandmother died. She was living with my Aunt at the time in Florida. She (Aunt) knew I was quilting, so she sent me two quilt tops that my Grandmother had made. They have not been finished. I still have those quilt tops. Hopefully, I will do something with them.

Q: Oh, was this a maternal or paternal Grandmother?

J: Paternal

Q: Oh, have you ever met her?

J: Yes, I met her, but I didn't know she quilted. The interesting thing, that when I got those two quilts tops, is that they were machine pieced and put together. I didn't know she had a machine even.

Q: Any particular pattern for the quilt tops?

J: One of them is Sunbonnet Sue. The other, I don't even remember what it was. It was very nicely put together. I'm going to assume that these were some of the dresses, pants, and things that she had used, but very nice.

Q: And she lived in Florida?

J: She originally lived in Arkansas, and when she got sick and her husband had passed. Then, there were no children... oh, one child only left there. She had two daughters and they were both in Florida. So, her daughter came up and got her and took her to live with her.

Q: Do you share fabric or exchange blocks? Anything?

J: No. I'm a loner [she laughs].

Q: What kind of group quilting activities have you been involved in?

J: None. Just the Dorcas [handquilters] and I go there.

Q: Did you work on the opportunity quilts?

J: No.

Q: Okay Dorcas. Tell me about your time at Dorcas [Quilters]?

J: Well, my time at Dorcas. Anna [Chan] told me about Dorcas, and I wanted to learn to quilt on a frame because I'm into handquilting. I knew I was going to need to handquilt at some time. I thought I was going to do a frame, but after going to Dorcas, I learned that I was going to use a hoop. [she laughs]

Lawson, Jurline  
Quiltmaker Story, April 1, 2008

I've learned to quilt on a frame, but it's very time consuming, and I couldn't get the way you have to sit. You can't twist and turn. I like to be able to twist and turn. So, quilting in a hoop that rotates is for me. That's for me, but I still go and support Dorcas and quilt there once a week.

Q: How long have you been a member of Dorcas?

J: I'm going to say about 8 years.

Q: Now, how long have you been with the San Francisco Quilters Guild [sfqg]?

J: You [Jean Low] referred to the SFQG. [she laughs] Yes, you did.

Q: Probably in our Tuesday quilting class [Caroline Lieberman's class].

J: Yes, in our Tuesday quilting class. At one time back in the [90's,] I went to the SFQG meeting. They were on Geary [Blvd.] somewhere, I think it was downstairs. I don't remember what church or whatever. So, I've been a member since 1994.

Q: What is it about quilting that you like?

J: I like seeing what other people are doing and how creative they are. I like the sense of giving me a place to go where I don't have to be a loner, [she laughs] and still retain my aloofness, so to speak [she laughs] because I like to be in control.

Q: Now, when you travel, what things.. do you stop at quilt shops or fabric shops?

J: I stopped in fabric shops when we went to Alaska. I stopped at a fabric shop and I bought fabric. The lady said that my husband should be a judge for some quilts they had there. [she laughs]

When we went to Johannesburg, I went to a quilt shop and a quilt show that they were having there and bought some fabric. I try to find whatever I can that has to do relating to quilting wherever I'm going so that I can have it.

Q: Do you work from patterns.. pictures?

J: Patterns. I must always have a pattern for whatever I do. I'm not a person with a good imagination. I definitely need a pattern to go on.

Q: And the Fabrics that you choose?

J: The fabrics I choose are bright fabrics and probably looking more to making flowers out of. So, the flowers would be bright flowers. Some subtle. I also look for different fabrics for background that are paler so that my fabrics can blend into. If I'm in some place, I like to see something that I can find that's peculiar to that area.

Q: Do you have advice for other quilters or new quilters about quilting?

J: No. Just do what you do! The people that are quilters have a sense of direction. They know where they are going. Most of the people I've come into contact with are so very, very talented that they have good color sense, a sense of what they want to do and how they want to do it!

Q: Do you have anything else you want to share?

Lawson, Jurline  
Quiltmaker Story, April 1, 2008

J: No. I just thank the quilters for giving me a sense of well being.

Q: Good, Good. That's the end.

Before her interview began, Jurline brought a sheet with some preliminary comments about her quiltmaking. It will be filed with this interview as page 9. She also showed a yellowed newspaper clipping of Charles Ross and his religious clerical garment creations. Jurline mentioned that he was methodical in teaching her how to design quilts. Everything was calculated before a quilt was begun. She pulled out a sampling of her graphed quilt design.

*Jurline*



My mother was an excellent seamstress. She did not need a pattern. She could cut out her own pattern from newspaper. I had sewing in school. My mother taught me how to turn the collar and cuff in my father's shirts. She sewed out of necessity and this is how I started sewing. I sewed clothes for my dolls, myself and my children. Now that it is no longer a necessity, I sew for pleasure and that pleasure is quilting; especially appliqué and hand quilting. For me to learn the process is more important than completing the quilt.

I had an Aunt that made quilts and I admired her work. I had my first quilt lessons in 1980 from Charles Ross. He was a roommate of a co-worker, a quilter, a maker of clerical vestments and at the time, a display designer for the Emporium. I completed the quilt that he helped me with in 1981.

After retiring from San Francisco City and County in 1992, I started taking quilting lessons from Caroline Liberman, Older Adult Division, San Francisco Community College. I am an avid watcher of quilting programs on television. I have also taken an appliqué class from Elly Sienkiewicz.

The quilting community has allowed me to meet a vast array of very talented people. I am basically a loner and quilting has allowed me to be more social and open.

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