



Lee Schulstad
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My grandmother made quilts. None of her six daughters made them, and as far as I know, I am the only one of her eight granddaughters who quilts. Grandma's quilts have always been spoken of by family members in hushed, awed tones, as if they were holy relics, which, I suppose, in a sense they are. I was inspired by Grandma's quilts to begin making quilts myself, although I have never expected to be her equal. Initially, I thought she made her quilts entirely by hand, and I thought that was the only way to make quilts. Fortunately, I soon learned otherwise. Then when an aunt gave me a double wedding ring quilt top that Grandma had made, telling me that she was giving it to me because she thought I could finish it (dream on, Aunt Carrie!), I discovered that Grandma machine-pieced just like the rest of us. Meanwhile, and this was 20-some years ago, I made a few quilts entirely by hand, maybe half a dozen altogether. I got basic how-to info from books, and just winged it for the rest. Then time and other projects intervened.

Early in 2011, my interest in quilting revived. In late 2010, my then-husband Mel and I had moved into a retirement community in Everett, Washington. I had a sewing machine, so I bought some fabric and started experimenting, still essentially clueless (by my current standards) about how to make a quilt.

Then the recreation director in the retirement community started a writers' group and I joined up. The intent of the group was to write our memoirs – we were to write a few pages about an episode in our past each week, to be shared with the group. The first week I dutifully wrote three or four pages about my early childhood in Gillette, Wyoming. The second week I didn't feel like writing any more memoirs, but I wanted to stay in the group for the socializing. I made a small quilt from fabric that featured scenes from California, referring to my having grown up in Southern California (moved there when I was 8 years old), and took it to the next writers' group meeting. It was a big hit, and I began making small – generally about 24 x 30 – quilts that each represented an event or aspect of my life. Autobiographical quilts.

I didn't have the patience to study a how-to book, let alone take a class, so I just happily sewed these quilts using whatever techniques I picked up online or by my own invention. Seams didn't match and the bindings were terrible, but ignorance is bliss.

After Mel passed away in January 2012, I moved to San Francisco. A few months after the move, I found my way to SFQG. WOW!! Talk about an eye-opener! Two things happened to me as a result of joining the Guild: I got serious about improving my quilt-making techniques, and I fell in love with quilt shows.

The memoir quilts I began with were not done with applique or piecing to form pictures in the style of landscape quilts or art quilts. Instead, I visited the local fabric shop regularly, searching for novelty fabrics that portrayed subjects that I could adapt for my purpose. Cats at the beach (it was a Southern California beach town that I grew up in), tractors (a long-time fascination of mine), Buffalo Bill Cody to signify Wyoming, and so on. While I no longer make memoir quilts, I am still attracted to novelty fabrics that express little stories. I see the fabric, I buy it, and when I get it home I study it to figure out a good way to let it tell its story.

Thus many of my quilts are not about the design, or the pattern, or the colors; my quilts have a theme, usually expressed by the fabric prints. I am the queen of fussy-cutting. Well, the princess, anyway. My go-to patterns have been Nine-Patch Pizzazz and Circle of Nine, although lately I have been moving out of my comfort zone and experimenting with more modern quilt designs. I tried long-arm quilting for a time, but never got very good at it – I didn't have the patience to spend time practicing. So now I just sew the quilt tops, and sometimes a fancy back, and happily pay a long-arm quilter to ply their impressive skills.

When, in early 2012, I volunteered for the 2013 Quilt Show, I had only been to one quilt show ever. Now I have been to dozens. I was co-chair for the SFQG 2015 show, and chair for the 2017 show. I go to every quilt show I possibly can. Every show has a different look, a different vibe, and I enjoy every one of them.

Quilting is simply the "focus fabric" of my life.

-- Lee Schulstad