

Quilt maker's Story: Caroline Lieberman
Interviewed by Jean Low
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Transcribed by Peggy Cleary



CL: I was born in Huntington, Indiana, and when I was about 9 months old, I moved to Evansville, Indiana, and I lived there all my life until I moved to California. When I was there (In Indiana), I went to grade school and high school and went on to go to Purdue University and graduated in history and government and politics. I came back to Evansville after I graduated and became a professional Girl Scout worker. I enjoyed that very much. I'd been a Girl Scout when I was a kid. I loved going to camp, that's where I learned to swim, and just enjoyed the outdoors and the beauty of it all. This job was there when I got back and it looked fascinating and they hired me and I became district director of camps and day camps in Evansville for the Raintree Girl Scout Council.

I had two brothers in Evansville, and my mom and dad, there was a lot of family in Evansville, but the lure of California got to me. Being a professional Girl Scout worker there were always job openings all over the country. There was an opening in San Bruno, California, and I applied, and the director had me fly out, first time on a big jumbo jet, and they interviewed me and I accepted the job out here and then came and that was in 1959. My middle brother Joe came with me, and we drove from Evansville all the way out to California.

I got settled into an apartment on Clay St. near San Francisco Fabrics, and I had no idea what a big part that was going to play in my life eventually!

JL: How did you get into quilting? Was there a family tradition?

CL: My great grandmother was a quilter, she lived in Lawrenceville, Illinois, and we used to go up and visit her a lot, and she had quilts. There were always quilts around in her house, and she gave us quilts, so there were always quilts around in our house, too. So I had a pink and white quilt that was mine, that she made for me when I was little. But the one I remember the best of all the quilts that she had made that we had is a Dresden Plate quilt that's made from fabrics from the 20's and 30's that's really neat, and that was always on the big bed in our house. I always liked it, but it never occurred to me to do anything about it.

My grandmother, her daughter, Lena Maxwell Snow, taught me to embroider, I learned to embroider when I was about six or seven, and then when I was in school, when I was in sixth grade or seventh grade, that was the homemaking time for the girls. I took the homemaking course, of course, and they taught sewing on the machine, and then my grandmother let me use her machine. She had an electric machine. When we were in school, all the machines were treadle machines, except one electric machine. This was right after World War II, and home sewing machines were low on the list of things for people to make right after the war. So that's how I learned to sew. I liked to sew and do the embroidery.

My grandmother was wonderful at crochet, but somehow the crochet, with a single strand of thread, I never could get. I could knit, but I didn't like crochet. I did sew a few things while I was in college. I didn't do quilting until 1974, when I found a book on modern patchwork. It was one of the few books available then. I had done a lot of sewing for the kids, and drapes for the house, but that is when I started patchwork.

I had lots of knit scraps from making shirts for my sons, and I made a tumbling blocks shirt for Andy and a crazy quilt shirt for Norman out of knits. It was interesting. In this Modern Patchwork book, all the patterns were different sizes, so I'd just try different things. After that I finally took a quilting class.

To get back to the family, I met Harry after I moved out here in 1959. I met him that winter. I had always wanted to learn how to sail, and he had a sailboat. We were married in August of 1960, so now we have been married 51 years! Much to my delight, he's a wonderful guy. We have two great boys, Andrew, Andy, and Norman who is 2 ½ years younger. Harry and the boys have always been very supportive of the quilting. Although, the boys got tired of going into the quilt stores, and finally said they wouldn't go in any more. That's okay, they appreciate them now. They just won't go into the quilt stores with me. They'll go to the shows.

JL: Do you have any favorite type of quilts, patterns that you use, techniques?

CL: I especially like appliqué. I've always liked appliqué. After I did some patchwork, I took a course at San Francisco Fabrics from Joan Seifert, and learned how to actually make a whole quilt. The first quilt I made was a bicentennial quilt. It had an eagle on it, and stars to represent the states. It had come about because in '69 there was a major

show at the Whitney Art Museum, and that spurred the beginning of the quilting revival, and you began to see patterns and quilts and designs, and decorated clothing in magazines. That's when I began to see Jean Ray Laury's name, and Charlotte Patera, and I just loved what they did, so that was a real inspiration. And also around that time, there was a show at the DeYoung of decorated jeans and jean jackets and all that.

I really liked appliqué, and I really liked doing everything by machine. So, I started decorating the boys' shirts. So, I did a hot air balloon, and I embroidered a spider web, and a Golden Gate Bridge, and one of the first things I did was put dinosaurs on the back of a denim shirt and things like that. They got lots of compliments, and I began making and selling kits, selling them at shows and by mail order and so on.

Somewhere along the line, the girl who taught sewing at San Francisco Fabrics decided to stop doing that. I asked Joan and Mrs. Hamlin if I could take her place doing that. Before that, I had been teaching sewing to children at the store and at Patty Taylor's arts and crafts school near the West Portal Library and at my house. I met Joann Watson, who taught quilting at Patty Taylor's, and then City College asked me if I would teach a four week quilting class because it was getting very popular, in the late 1970s. Guilds were beginning to form, like the Santa Clara Guild, and the East Bay Heritage Quilters, and the Santa Rosa group.

I also heard of Joyce Gross who was organizing quilting things in Marin. She had the Mill Valley Quilt Authority, and I heard her on the radio. She organized the first quilt show I ever saw, which was quilts from the big museum in Denver, which Joyce borrowed and displayed at the Mill Valley Rec. Center! One of them was a big multi-piece tree quilt in a woods scene; it's a nationally known quilt now. It was an amazing little show, very exciting, so a lot of people did come and take a look.

The next big show that I remember was one that Diane McClun had done in the East Bay, and she had set it up at the Mormon Temple, and she had set it up just beautifully, and the East Bay Heritage Quilters had been in business long enough that they got a lot of great quilts in, and she set up individual vignettes. I remember this really well. She had an outdoor patio. They had brought in bricks and laid them down in an area the size of this dining room we're sitting in, and set up a table and chairs and hung the quilts all around it. It was another truly, truly amazing show. So this was all very very inspirational.

But then I got asked to do this 4-week class and so I said yes. I broke it into patchwork, appliqué, the third week, I demonstrated quilting, and the fourth week we must have just followed up on all this stuff. I had 40 students, in small room with chairs that just had arms. It was a great success and it was a lot of fun, and at that particular one, Mary Ann Zaremska was there. And she came up to me afterward and said, "Is there some way we can keep on doing this? It's so much fun to be with other quilters." And I said, "It is. Let me see what I can do." And that's how it came about. And Mary Ann Zaremska is now Alexandra and has moved away to Oregon.

But I talked to Joann Watson, who was teaching quilting at Patty Taylor's school and said are you interested in trying to see if we can get anything like this going? And she said she was. And I think she got Lorna Phoenix from her group, and I got a gal named Judy Coffin from that class, Mary Ann couldn't come, I must've asked her, and the four of us met, and we said, "Yeah, let's give it a try and see what we can do." So we were able to get a few more people together and we were able to have our first meeting.

Because Joann Campbell and Lorna Phoenix were both public health nurses, they got Public Health Center no. 5 for our first meeting. We had quite a few people at that meeting, 30-40 people probably. I remember that that meeting is where I met Millie Breitbarth and her daughter Linda Breitbarth, and a gal who I had seen at these various quilt shows but I didn't know who she was, that was Lynn Piercy. Shirley Towan as another one that Joann had brought in. That first meeting we had Jeanette Hensley come down from Santa Rosa she's a good friend of mine, and she was in the Santa Rosa Guild. I had been up to the Santa Rosa Guild and been to some of their meetings. She came down and brought the group quilts so people could see what group quilts were like. And we advertised it in the sewing stores and just sort of word of mouth. That was in July of 81.

Then the next month, August, we had probably about the same number, and Mary Whitehead came and spoke. She talked about appliqué, is what I remember, and she had had major surgery not long before, and we were concerned about whether she would be up to it, but she was and she came. She's been a favorite teacher of everybody in the guild for all the many years she was with us.

In September, we did a business meeting and set up the bylaws, which mostly followed the peninsula guild's bylaws, and got it all set up, and then our official first meeting was in October 1981. There were 50 people there and those are our charter members. I can't believe it's been thirty years!

JL: And you've been a member ever since.

CL: Yeah, ever since, I've been the troublemaker and the whole thing.

JL: So have you seen a lot of changes in the Guild or in the world of quilting?

CL: Well, yes. It's been exciting. Look at the fabrics you can get now. I think that's one of the things that amazes me the absolute most. When I started, it was very hard to find 100% cotton. There was a lot of cotton-polyester blends, 80% polyester, or sheeting, and people thought sheets were wonderful to use, nooooo. One of the first quilts I made was one I promised Andy I would make if the 49ers won the Super Bowl. I had the design all drawn out and everything before the Super Bowl game. It's actually kind of an ugly green on the borders, which represents the football field, because that's all that was available. The defensive line of the 49ers was called "the brick wall". I had to make my own bricks; I had to find different colors of red, make the bricks, and everything. Now, you can find fabric printed with bricks, rocks, anything you want or need, every bug,

every butterfly, that to me is totally amazing, all the gorgeous fabrics that are available now.

Then all the notions are the other thing, because when I started there was no rotary cutter, there was no board, no rulers.

JL: Were there many books?

CL: No. There was the Modern Patchwork book, Margaret Pinkus' book on patchwork, which was a sort of how-to and had all the different patterns in it but you would have to draft them yourself. Then, the books started coming out and that was totally amazing.

JL: You were involved in the Ho! For California! Book project?

CL: Right. Yeah. We were involved in the Northern California Quilt Council, and Joyce Gross was involved in that, again. So, she said at one point, Kentucky had had a project going where they had researched their old quilts, and she brought the book to the council and said "I think California should do this." They said, "Oh, yeah, how will we do this, what will the criteria be?" Our guild gave \$100 for a meeting and the other guilds gave money too, and they each sent representatives and met to decide whether we could really do this quilt search since California really is a very big state. And they decided we could do this, it would be quilts from the beginning of the state up to 1945. And it took a long time, quite a few years, right up to 1990, when we published the book and had the shows.

The Fresno Art Museum curated the show and selected the quilts, and the show was displayed in Eureka, Fresno, Mills College (Oakland), and the San Diego Quilt Museum. It was a wonderful exhibit and a great book, Jean Ray Laury was the author of it, it's a great history.

JL: It's a real classic.

CL: Yeah, it is a classic. Dutton published it. Two of our Guild members had quilts in the book; Millie Breitbarth's family's quilt was in it, the one that her great great grandparents made on their way from the East Coast to the West Coast via Panama. Their boat went down there, and when they got down there, they got off the boat and they took donkeys across the isthmus and then came up on another boat to San Francisco. And that family's name is in one of the early directories of San Francisco, like '51 or so. California Pioneers. And then the other quilt was Esther Henley's, a beautiful star quilt. Her family quilt. I don't remember how it came now. Whether it came by car...might've come by car. I don't remember, but that was special that we had a couple of our Guild members in there. There were a lot of great stories in there. That was an exciting project to work on and be involved with, and I was involved with the book and working with Jean Ray and doing all of that.

JL: Do you remember how many quilts were collected? 100? Did you have quilt days?

CL: Oh, maybe 400. Yes, the way we found the quilts was that we had museum quilt days. The deYoung was kind enough to let us use the huge room that had the tapestries in it then, you know, before the new museum was put up, and so we called it a quilt day, and we advertised it through the newspaper and through all the different channels, and a lot of times we'd have at least 100 people at the quilt days. And we didn't appraise them, but we had quilt experts come in that could date them and name them, and took information from all the people and got permission from them to use it. All those records are now down in the L.A. County Art Museum. There were some really magnificent quilts, and we did quilt days all over the state, from 'way up in Eureka all the way down to San Diego. The oldest quilt that was dated was 1849, it belonged to a woman in San Diego, and it's an interesting old appliqué quilt. If you have a chance, any of you who are reading this interview, look up that book, Ho! For California! It's got to be around in various libraries.

JL: And after that you were involved in the CHQP getting more quilt makers' stories.

CL: Yeah, after the project was finished, rather than disband the CHQP, California Heritage Quilt Project, we decided to try to interview quilt makers all over the state. It was sort of the same thing, going to different guilds and getting the members to give their oral history, so that took quite a few years. Those oral histories are in the archives in Sacramento. We're trying to figure out where else we might want to put them. Most of them have been transcribed to paper.

JL: Otherwise, a lot of people don't know anything about quilt makers.

CL: Right. And the other thing that CHQP did that was really special was that we were asked to make a quilt for the sesquicentennial of California. So we did, and that's a marvelous quilt. It traveled the state and had over two million people see it, because it went to a lot of the county fairs and traveled over the entire state. It's an appliqué quilt that was done by over 234 quilt artists because individual artists did the blocks that represented the different areas of the state, and then it was put together with all kinds of trees and brush and things. It's a pictorial quilt, showing California, with the wagons coming across the Nevada plains and the ships in the ocean and everything. It's a beautiful quilt. That's now in the Golden State, what's now the California History Museum, and that was a major project for us. We're just finally getting it into a case up there.

My favorite quilts, I really like appliqué, but I like piecework too, I try different things all the time. I have tried to make quilts for each of my children and grandchildren. I don't promise anybody else quilts anymore, because I don't always get them done. I've finally realized that what speaks to me in quilting is the fabric. I start with the fabric, rather than the pattern. Like the quilt, Parrots of the Night Jungle. It was a fabric that I just had to have at San Francisco Fabrics, not knowing what I'd do with it. I made an attic windows quilt, because of the big parrots, and I love it. I remember being at the Oakland Quilt

Show. I saw a blue and purple fabric with fairies that I loved, and I bought 3 or 4 yards of it and made a quilt out of it. I made the quilt from the book The Tortilla Quilt.

Then I've done a lot of quilts for my classes. After that first class for City College, they asked me back for another 8-week class, and there was a series of many 8-week classes, down at Marina Middle School. Then eventually they put me over at the John Adams campus, and all my classes were at night, and I always scheduled my classes so they would not meet on the night the Guild met. That's how we got a lot of Guild members! (laughs) Around that time, Lincoln Park Presbyterian Church wanted a quilt class, and they approached the head of this part of City College, and he came to me and asked if I would do that class at this church at 31st and Clement, and we've been doing that since '85. Most of my students from the evening class who were free on Friday mornings came with me to that class.

We started doing group quilts there, which was really exciting. The first one we did was for the 50th birthday of the Golden Gate Bridge. That was a lot of fun. Most people did a block, and there was a center medallion that I worked on with a couple of other gals. We put it all together and got it all quilted, and it was really pretty. It won viewers' choice at the Marin Show, that's what I remember, and it might've won a ribbon too, I can't remember, and then we put it in a contest that Channel 5 had. I couldn't go to the event, Harry was in the hospital, but they had different Golden Gate things to judge, including our quilt. We didn't win first, we won second, but the first was a Golden Gate Bridge made out of toothpicks! (Laughs) That was quite a work of art too.... We had a drawing on that one, and we happened to have a girl from Germany staying with us, so we had her draw the winning ticket, and I won it. I graciously accepted, and I let anyone borrow it to display that wants to. It substituted for the Sesquicentennial quilt in Sacramento once, and things like that. It's been displayed various places.

I asked the ladies if they wanted to do both San Francisco and Marin County scenes, you know, and they said no, they only wanted to do San Francisco! They did the Tea Garden, The Strybing Arboretum, and the seals on Seal Rock, and it's a fun quilt.

Another thing we did, was one of my students, Kirsten, was from Denmark, and she suggested we do a quilt for the 1,000th anniversary of Odense, Denmark. So, we did one with fairy tale scenes from Hans Christian Andersen fairytales since he was from there. So we did that, and that was really neat. We did the blocks, and we did a central medallion with a big swan, and a little girl sitting there reading the book of fairy tales. The swan had a wing that was free, I mean it wasn't pinned down to the quilt. Kirsten was able to get it over there in time for the big celebration. Actually, once they found out about it, the Danish airline flew her on a complimentary ticket, and when the people in Odense saw it, they said "No no, this is too important and too precious, we will not hang it in City Hall, we will take it directly to the museum." It was hung in their museum, (in fact I think right now it's in retirement for a while) but it was very well received, and I've seen pictures of it on the covers of magazines from overseas, and everybody really likes it and post cards were made of it, and the swan's wing got sort of dirty from everybody petting it. (laughs). I'm glad it was loved, it was really pretty. They did a good job on it.

So this was the Friday class. They did some neat things.

So many of us belonged to the Academy of Sciences we thought that would be a fun thing to do, so we did the same thing. Different blocks representing all the different sections of the Academy, before this new one was built, and did a center medallion of the whales, the fountain that was in the courtyard, which they've now given to City College and it's in a warehouse somewhere, and the quilt is in storage too. But when they had it on display, it was in a case, and it looked very nice, some of the docents would start their tours there because it had all the different things on it. It was a great project for us. The California bear, if you remember the old California bear, was in there, and rocks, and the two headed snake, and stuff.

JL: I remember asking if the Friday class people were artists because the group quilts were so beautiful.

CL: Well, with a group quilt, you can play off each other's ideas, and trade materials. I remember on that one, somebody was doing the block of the Gary Larson room, with the cartoons and the giant microscope, and she couldn't find fabric that was the right shade for the walls, and she asked, and somebody came up with it. That's one of the great things with a group quilt that you have all this back and forth cooperation.

JL: Now in terms of the blocks, did the drawings have to be auditioned to be on the front of the quilt?

CL: No, I mean I saw everything, but there was never any question. Mostly everything came out well. There were some that were far better than others, but mostly everything was just great. Pretty much everybody helped each other, so that was nice. That quilt hung for a long time at the Academy of Sciences.

The next quilt was the United Nations, and we were asked to do that. That turned out to be a real challenge. That one is hanging down at the War Memorial Building. It's in a special case down there.

JL: Who asked you to do that?

CL: The committee organizing the commemoration 75th anniversary of the signing of the United Nations Charter, which had taken place here, they met in the Opera House in the War Memorial Building. They kept giving us all these ideas and things that they wanted, and finally I said, "I can't deal with this. We will make the quilt, and if you want it, fine, and if you don't, that's okay too." So, then they left us alone and we did our own thing. And we actually took many scenes and many units within the United Nations that dealt with women and children and that's what's in the quilt, with a big center medallion of people of the world. I'm really proud of all those quilts. We had a good time doing it, we had a great experience, we hand quilted all of them ourselves.

JL: And each one of the quilts on the back has a label?

CL: Yes, with all the information, what we did.

So the other quilt they did is they did a little quilt for the California Heritage Quilt Project, which has where all the museum shows were, and it's down at the L.A. County Art Museum with all the CHQP memorabilia. But we haven't done anything in the class lately; we've just been trying different things. The class is still in existence, and I have another class on Thursday afternoons, which used to be on Tuesday for years and years and years, but they're not that interested in appliqué. It's funny. I guess I'm really in love with the appliqué quilt. They're all in postcard form now, except the Golden Gate Bridge.

JL: There's also the Official Golden Gate Bridge Quilt.

CL: Yes, the Guild made that, and I think it's displayed in an office of the Bridge Authority. A lot of people from the Guild worked on that, Phyllis Schaeffer and Gloria Miller were very involved in that. I remember we went to Phyllis's house to try to get it all together and figure out the layout.

JL: I think there was a contest, and I think the block that came farthest was from Japan. So you're continuing to teach...

CL: Right, as long as I can carry the suitcase and don't forget too many things. After all, I'm 75 now.

JL: Are you?

CL: Mm-hmm. I think I should put you in charge of letting me know when I'm not functioning too well anymore. But, I don't ever sell my quilts. I've never sold a quilt. Of course, we've donated all these group quilts, and both classes have done donation quilts, especially the Friday class. After Katrina [hurricane], one of our former Guild members lived down there. So, we made a lot of lap quilts for the kindergarten kids to have for their naps, because down there they have the air conditioning up really high, and the kids get really cold when they lay down to take their little rest.

JL: Have you taken a lot of classes from teachers, or are you self-taught from books?

CL: Oh, I took a lot of classes. I had the good fortune to take classes from Jean Ray Laury, Charlotte Patera, Jinny Beyer, and when we would have people come out to talk at the Guild and they gave a class, I'd take it. I haven't taken many lately.

I do have some quilts hanging at home.

JL: Have you written any articles on quilting?

CL: No.

JL: Do you have any advice for new quilters?

CL: Just to keep at it. It's amazing. I really think people who make quilts are just nice people. To share a love of fabrics and putting projects together like that has been really wonderful.

JL: Are you amazed we are coming up on the 30th anniversary of the Guild?

CL: Yes. I recently looked over a speech I made a while back, and I said I hoped I'd be invited to the 25th anniversary! I'm delighted to see how the Guild has grown and stayed strong. We've had a few ups and downs on things, but I think overall it's been great and everybody's done a fantastic job. Many interesting speakers have come in, and there are art quilts, which you didn't see in the beginning, and there are innovations, where it used to be very traditional. They used to have quilting bees where people got together and did their quilting together, and I think that's what some of these classes are, too, where people get together and share thoughts and ideas.

JL: In teaching, what do you foresee for your students?

CL: I hope that the students develop a love for the art of quilting and enjoy doing it and make friends and learn, but not worry so much about the technique because it doesn't matter. I think they should have fun. That's what I tell the students: "I just want you to have fun. I don't want you to worry about anything! Call me, or email me if you have questions, don't sit there and stew about it." You just want to enjoy it. My students love to make quilts for their grandchildren, and for weddings. That's what most of them do. That's, I think, just great, a reward in itself.

JL: Anything else you want to add?

CL: Oh, I don't know, keep working, enjoying it. (laughs) I hope the Guild continues on. It seemed that for a while people thought everything was dying, but it doesn't seem that way to me now. Magazines are strong, and there are as many patterns as ever, and there are so many people doing different art quilt stuff, like that recent speaker who wanted to have the first quilt in the Modern Art Museum, and good for her! Because I think it is real art, and people are recognizing that more and more. Working with people on quilting has been a real joy.