

Betty McNeil

Quiltmaker's History

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Interviewed by Jean Low, SFQG Historian

Betty: I went to college, I have two children, a husband, lived in San Francisco since 1982, started quilting in 1987. Got interested in it in the mid-80s, through my mother, who started subscribing to Quilters Newsletter.

Jean: Where did you grow up?

Betty: Saudi Arabia.

Jean: Military Family?

Betty: No, my father was a petroleum engineer. I was born there. My family lived there for 30 years.

Jean: Do you speak any of the languages?

Betty: Well, they speak Arabic there, I speak some Arabic.

Jean: Wow, that must have been some experience. What type of school?

Betty: There are thousands of Americans and other Westerners there, so the oil company that produces Saudi Arabia's oil has communities there for those people to live in. Back in the '40s and '50s you weren't going to get people to go there without that. The societies are so different that you couldn't really have that many foreign people living there without having some sort of separation between the groups because the differences were too great. And in those days when oil was first discovered it's hard to describe how empty the land was. There

was no electricity, I don't think, maybe, anywhere in the whole kingdom, at least not in the area where the oil was. They had to build everything, so the oil company had to provide places for us to live. We had our own little area, sort of like a military base but not exactly like that. We had our own schools; Aramco brought the medical care to the area, where it had never been before; and education, they built the first schools for girls. They pretty much got the modern infrastructure of modern Saudi Arabia going and they still are involved with that.

Jean: Wow. When you went to college, where did you go and what did you study?

Betty: I went to Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon and studied communication.

Jean: Do you have work experience?

Betty: Not in that, I was in a car accident soon after college, that left me with a lot of injuries, and that derailed my plans to go to graduate school. Then I decided time was running out to have children, so that's what I did.

Jean: We were talking about getting into quilting through your mom. She was a quilter?

Betty: Well she was a really good seamstress. Like I said, in Saudi Arabia there really wasn't much infrastructure, so we really didn't have access to clothing stores or anything, so she made a lot of the clothes for my sister and me. You could order things from the States or you could go every two years and buy enough stuff to last for two years. But there were fabric stores, so we would go buy fabric and she would make our clothes. She was a good needle person. She was good at hand sewing and making clothing and she crocheted, but she didn't start getting interested in quilt making until after she retired.

She never made a quilt until then. She was subscribing to Quilters Newsletter, but she was very indecisive. She couldn't decide on a pattern or fabric. She was making crochet afghans for all of her children. I was last in line. When she asked me to choose a pattern, I didn't really like the afghan patterns, but I liked the quilt patterns. So, I said, "How about if you make me a quilt? I'll pick the pattern so you don't have to decide." She said, "Yeah, that's a great idea!"

So, I picked the pattern and we went and bought the fabric together. We cut the fabric in half, because she lived in Seattle and I lived here. We each pieced half the blocks by hand because I'd never used a sewing machine. Then she sewed the blocks together and hand quilted it. So we got started on it together.

Jean: Did you take classes to learn?

Betty: No, I didn't. I realized hand piecing was going to take forever. I got a sewing machine but I really didn't know how to use it. She wasn't here to teach me, she was up in Seattle. I just sort of muddled around. I didn't really even know that there were classes to take. I just had books and magazines and did it that way until I joined the Guild. The first class I took was at QuiltAway at Point Bonita, and I took a class from Mary Whitehead. My machine wasn't that great, and I was a little frustrated because I would cut everything really precisely but I could never get everything to match up because the top piece would always slip down a little bit, you know.

But once I had a better machine I was happier. So now I have the machine that my mom sewed

on when I was a kid, an old Singer from like 1942. I love that machine. All it does is go backward and forward, but it does that really well. I use that for most of my quilting.

Jean: You have two quilts here; do you want to talk about them?

Betty: Well, the first one I made for a challenge the Guild had for a show several years ago, I think it was "Games People Play." I took the idea from the backgammon board I have at home. It's very common in the Middle East, it's a box, made of mother of pearl and wood, and on the inside, it's backgammon, and on the outside, it's checkers or chess. This one is the backgammon side, and there's another one that is the checkerboard, and it has handles so you could put them together and fold them up.

This other one is called "Spinning to the Right" and I started it at QuiltAway in Mary Mashuta's class. It was a class on design and color, and we used the color wheel. She had us pick a certain kind of color combination. This one was called something like "extended complimentary". She wanted us to bring a range within each color, from warm to cool and light to dark. That was a really great class, I really enjoyed it. What I ended up making wasn't anything like what I had on the wall at QuiltAway, it ended up very different.

But I couldn't have made it without going to QuiltAway, because we all helped each other. No matter how many fabrics you brought with you, there was always something missing, there was always something you needed. We were all swapping fabric and so there are a few fabrics from other people in the class. That makes it more special to me because I look at it and I think, "Oh, thank you, Adrienne and Kenan for giving me those fabrics. Without that one fabric, it just wouldn't have been the same."

Jean: And like, different textures, stripes, and plaids?

Betty: Yes, she encouraged us to use stripes, because it's kind of like a windmill, and the stripes give it more movement.

Jean: You've been with our guild a while, you've entered quilts in our guild shows. Have you entered in other shows?

Betty: I don't think I've ever entered any other show.

Jean: And you've won ribbons, too.

Betty: Yeah, a couple. Only two. Not very many.

Jean: I've seen your work, it's really nice. Now getting back to this quilt, did you machine quilt this one?

Betty: Yeah, it's all machine done. It was actually pretty difficult to get it straight. Especially when the piecing isn't perfectly straight, that actually emphasizes it when the line isn't straight. Also, this is kind of large for me, because it's hard to handle the weight because I don't have a large table. I think I actually quilted most of it standing up. I put it on my drafting table.

Jean: Are you making most of your quilts for someone, or "just because"?

Betty: Sometimes I make them because it's a class and decide afterward who to give it to, but mostly I make for certain people. One that I had in the show last time my nephew really liked so

I gave it to him.

Jean: And they're all appreciative.

Betty: Oh yeah. He wouldn't have gotten it if he didn't tell me how much he liked it.

Jean: Do you have a fabric stash?

Betty: Oh yes, I do, definitely.

Jean: How large is it?

Betty: I don't want to disclose that information, it's confidential! (laughs) Let's just say it's plenty.

Jean: So when you buy a fabric, how much do you buy of something?

Betty: You know, that's a difficult question. It depends. I always try to swear off buying fat quarters, because if you have a quarter, you always end up asking yourself, "why don't I have a half, or a yard?" I tend not to buy big pieces, but then I'm caught when I come to the back because I don't have enough. It depends, if I can find a good price on a five-yard bundle, I'll get that. But I usually don't buy that much of anything.

Jean: What are your fabric resources, where do you buy fabric?

Betty: Well, you know, lately I've decided to try not to buy fabric online, because I don't want the brick and mortar stores to go away. Whenever I go out of town, I try to look on the map and see if there are any quilting stores since we don't have any here in the city. Like I just went to visit relatives down on the central coast and went to a couple of quilt shops while I was down there. I guess I don't have any regular ones that I go to. Just all the nearby ones.

Jean: Are there certain colors or patterns that you gravitate toward?

Betty: I suppose there are, but I try to be aware of where there are holes and what I might be missing, because you never know when you are designing a quilt what you might need. I guess like a lot of people I tend to collect too many medium value fabrics, so I've been trying to get more that have a larger scale and more that have more dark and light value. I also like the Modern aesthetic, and I've been collecting more in that Modern vein.

Jean: In terms of making quilts, do you look at patterns or develop your own?

Betty: I usually draft my own. This pinwheel one was from a class, but I drafted the backgammon board. Most patterns are pretty simple. Even if I've gotten inspiration from a traditional block, I usually get out the graph paper and draft it for myself in the size I want.

Jean: What is it about quilting that you like?

Betty: I like pretty much all of it except basting. Because something always goes wrong the first time. I get the top all basted and I turn it over and it looks terrible and I have to do it again. So that part I don't like. I like designing. I'm kind of slow, I put it up on the design wall, and I have to think about the different patterns of the different fabrics and colors and decide what I want to do. I like the piecing, and I like the quilting, I like every part of it. It's kind of meditative I

guess.

Jean: You also belong to a sewing group.

Betty: Yes, I belong to two.

Jean: Which ones?

Betty: Easy Piecers and Wednesday ??s

Jean: Do you sew there, or is it mostly social?

Betty: It's mostly social, but it's also a lot of support and sharing what we're doing and giving suggestions and sometimes we do projects together. We do a lot of machine sewing so it's not really that practical to do sewing together because there's just not enough space for machines. But if anybody has handwork, quilting or binding, they'll bring it. Sometimes we'll help each other with bindings, and we'll give each other advice. Lots of advice. People bring their projects in progress and show everybody what they're working on, and we share books and magazines and articles that we think the others will want to look at. Sometimes we'll go on field trips together. We'll go to quilt shows together, or we'll go shopping together or something.

Jean: You've been involved in the Opportunity Quilt. Those have been made by both sewing circles.

Betty: Yes. There was some concern that there was no Opportunity quilt, so both my groups decided, if nobody was going to make one, they'd better make one. That took up a lot of energy and time, but it was fun.

Jean: Is your house decorated with quilts?

Betty: Yeah, actually both these quilts live on my wall. I took this one down from my dining room.

Jean: Oh, Okay. Do you rotate your quilts?

Betty: No, I haven't been very good about decorating my house, I must say, so I don't have a lot of things on the wall. I probably will. I use one of those magnetic systems that I got at our last show. You use an adhesive strip to put a magnetic plate on the wall and then you put a metal rod in the sleeve. I did that so I could put up different size quilts without putting a hole in the wall.

Jean: That's a good tip.

Betty: Yeah. That's one reason I don't decorate, I don't want to commit. I'm like my mother. My mother couldn't commit to a quilt pattern. I can't commit to where I want to put something on the wall.

Jean: What teachers have you taken quilt classes from?

Betty: I haven't taken that many classes, I mostly take classes at QuiltAway. I took one or two classes at Black Cat way back before it closed, but I can't even remember who they were. I've taken a couple of classes from Mary Mashuta. If I had to say a favorite, I'd probably say her. I

took her machine quilting class also at the Cotton Patch. I took Dale Fleming 's class at QuiltAway. She taught a class using freezer paper and glue to insert circles and other shapes. I took Joe Cunningham's class.

Jean: Do you do hand quilting?

Betty: I do some, but I don't do applique. I'm okay at hand quilting, but I have shoulder and neck pain so I have to be careful not to overdo it. I like the soothing nature of it, it's very relaxing but it doesn't always agree with my pain condition.

Jean: You're involved with volunteering for the Guild. What have you done?

Betty: I did hospitality for a long time, now I'm on membership. I always volunteer for the shows, like with judging.

Jean: And as a committee member for long-range planning for the Guild? How do you see the Guild going forward?

Betty: The committee report isn't out yet, I can't speak to that.

Jean: What would you say to somebody who's thinking about quilting?

Betty: Well, I would definitely say joining a guild is a great thing to do. I was reluctant. Karen Reiter had to sort of talk me into it. I was quilting for about ten years before I joined the Guild. And even then, I didn't really get very involved at first because I had young children, and I kind of dropped in and out and didn't feel I had a lot of time to come to meetings and so forth. But it's been really helpful. I would say not only join a guild, but volunteer. If you're going to join, volunteer and try to find a small group to join because that's how you'll really learn.

And definitely take classes, especially if you're not comfortable with your machine. I wish I had done that in the beginning. I think that would have been really helpful. There are a lot of things that people who know how to use machines know that I didn't know because I'd never made clothes or anything like that. Take classes on how to use the machine. And there are just so many tips you can learn just from being around other quilters that you might not pick up on your own. It was very important for me to do that.

Jean: So when you started you had children in school?

Betty: Well, I started quilting before my son was born. It was while I was pregnant with him that I was working on my first quilt with my mom. I couldn't do a whole lot over the next few years having young children and not having a sewing room.

That's the other thing I was going to say to quilters. Get some sort of a sewing space that you can call your own because what was a big handicap for me was I didn't have anywhere to set up my machine and leave it up and that just is a real barrier when you have to get everything out every single time and set it up. It wasn't until I moved into a house where I could have my own sewing area that I really got going on it. That was only about 7 or 8 years ago. Up until then I just kind of had to do it when I got a chance, which wasn't that often.

Jean: Is your fabric stash organized?

Betty: It's pretty organized. I tend to pull things out when I'm working on a project, then I have

to put them back, so periodically I have to go through and reorganize. Also, my stash has expanded since my son left the house. My sewing room has been spilling over into his room. His closet has got some fabric in it now.

Jean: Is it in bins, on shelves...?

Betty: We have one of those funny San Francisco houses, you know, our house has two kitchens. I guess at one point it was an actual in-law. It's not an actual separate apartment, but I think grandma or somebody lived upstairs. There's an extra kitchen up there, with a stove, and a fridge, and a sink, and counters, and cupboards. I store the fabric in the cupboards. It's nice because they're at eye level and I can see all the colors when I open the cupboards. I have them separated into bigger pieces and smaller pieces and I have them arranged by color. It was really helpful when I took Mary Mashuta's class. I had sort of had everything separated into the color groups, and then the first thing we did was to take the color wheel and separate things into finer categories like blue violet, and red-violet, and orange yellow, and so on.

Then I have stripes and flannels and other "species".

Jean: Where do you get ideas for new projects?

Betty: I have so many ideas for projects in my head. There are certain fabrics I really want to use and I haven't figured out how. I do check books out from the Guild library. Magazines. I even look at quilts in advertisements for Pottery Barn or whatever.

Jean: Do you have an idea of how many quilts you've made?

Betty: I have no idea. I've actually made a lot of baby quilts for the church. It's a small church, but we started having a little baby boom after not having any babies for a while, and my father had just died, and I was thinking about the new life coming into the world, and I decided to make a baby quilt for each new baby. I made quite a few baby quilts. It's the 7th Avenue Presbyterian Church.

Jean: Any final thoughts?

Betty: No, that's it.