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Reece, Hazel: A Quilter's Life [1]

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Hazel Reece: a quilter's life

by David Cecelski. "Listening to History [2]," *News & Observer*. Published 1/9/2000. Copyrighted.
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Hazel Reece is one of the finest quilters of our day. Her quilts have won many awards and honors, including a Best of Show at the N.C. State Fair. One of her quilts graces the N.C. Museum of History in Raleigh. In 1991, she and her sister Effie were the first quilters to receive an N.C. Heritage Award [3].

I interviewed Mrs. Reece at her home in the Southwest community of Onslow County [4]. Born in 1925, she grew up there on tenant farms and was raised in the Primitive Baptist Church. She shared more with me than the beauty of her quilts: Every stitch had a story, every scrap a memory, every square a piece of history.



Hazel Reece. Photo by Chris Seward, 2000. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

> They said that my mother was very talented with her needle. Times was hard, and so they would make quilts out of the old worn clothes. They didn't make quilts for looks. They made a quilt for cover, because the houses were cold. And, with
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> Me and my youngest sister, Daisy, used to get scraps and rags and get our scissors and needle and try to sew our dolls' clothes. Most of our play was on Sundays. My oldest sister, Nellie, would say, "If you sew on Sunday, you'll have to take
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> I remember the first quilt that I ever made by a pattern. I was about 14 years old. Nellie cut the pattern out of a paper bag or a newspaper. It was made out of squares and triangles and we called it the "Monkey Wrench." I still have that quilt. V
>
> After I got married, I knew we had to make quilts. My husband has made a good living for us, but a mechanic, back in the '40s, you didn't make too much pay. All I was doing was trying to make quilts to go on the bed for the winter. I didn't rea
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> I had four aunts that lived here. I would go to their quiltings. Their quilts were made out of scraps, and then they would put the top together in one big piece and put it into the frame. Most of their frames were in straight lines, diagonal. They'd u
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> Family and neighbors would all get together and quilt. If they quilted all day, they would have dinner. When I was little, I would get under the quilt and play. I cannot tell you what an impression that makes on a child, to be under one of those p
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> I had seen my older sisters quilting. When I was a little girl, they let me stick a needle down and up. But really I learned from mama's sisters. I would get just as close to one of my aunts, no matter how many neighbors were there. I was awful
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> Now, Aunt Mary Robinson, she would take in and do over, and take out and do over. Grandma Gillett taught her to do that - she sewed Confederate uniforms, so you know that her handstitching had to be good. If Aunt Mary made a dress out
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> Most of the quiltings were in the early spring, when the days begin to get warmer. Now, I always did a lot of piecing in the winter time. I would cut during the day and hand stitch it at night.
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> When I'd go out to Aunt Mary Jarman's and she'd be cutting and piecing a quilt, she'd say, "Don't you want to make you a quilt, don't you want my pattern?" I would sit there and cut me a pattern from her pattern and take a few of her scraps a
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> My cousins - my aunts' daughters - didn't do any quilting when I was quilting along with their mothers. If they did, my aunts made them do it. It was just a joy to me when Aunt Mary Jarman's granddaughter come to my quilting class. In a way,
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> I have give all my children and grandchildren quite a few quilts. I never sold many quilts, not directly. Most of what quilting I have sold would be a special order for special people, and I like it that way. That way I got to know the people I was n
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> Like in 1976, a woman named Betsy Lewis saw my quilt in the State Fair. She called me, they came by, and she wanted the Oak Leaf. I made it in blues. When she come to pick up that quilt, there was a bond between me and that quilt and tl
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> I never made a quilt just to try to get a ribbon onto it. I never did. No matter who I am making it for, I never sat down to a quilt but what I don't think about them. I put a lot of love into it.
>
> If it is for my family, my quilts have laughter into them. I can be right by myself thinking about the good times in my life, and I sit there and laugh out loud. I can sit there and I can fuss. And I can cry. I put some of all emotions that I have into m
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> Now my eyes are not seeing as clearly. My fingers are not as nimble. My wrists and my shoulders and my back hurt too bad from arthritis to put the work into it the way I used to. I'm doing the best I can. No matter how tired I am, if I can just s

This is an excerpt from the "Listening for a Change [5]" project of the Southern Oral History Program [6] at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Additional information from NCpedia editors at the State Library of North Carolina: :
Hazel Reece lived from January 11, 1925 - February 7, 2015.

Obituary: Hazel Reece. Jacksonville Daily News. February 9-10, 2015.http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/jdnews/obituary.aspx?pid=174099151 [7] (Accessed 3/8/2016).

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