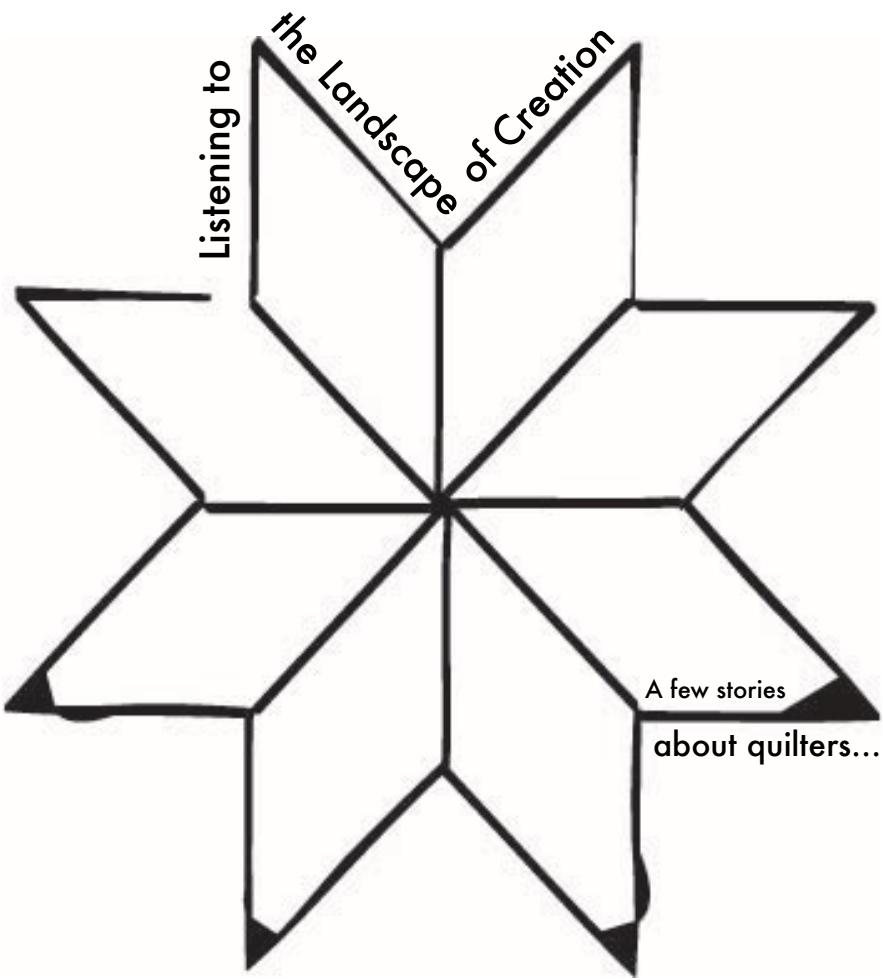
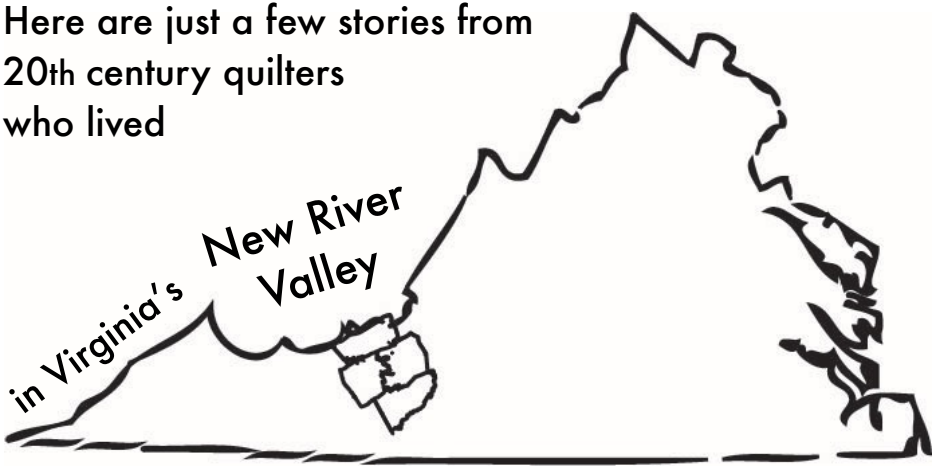
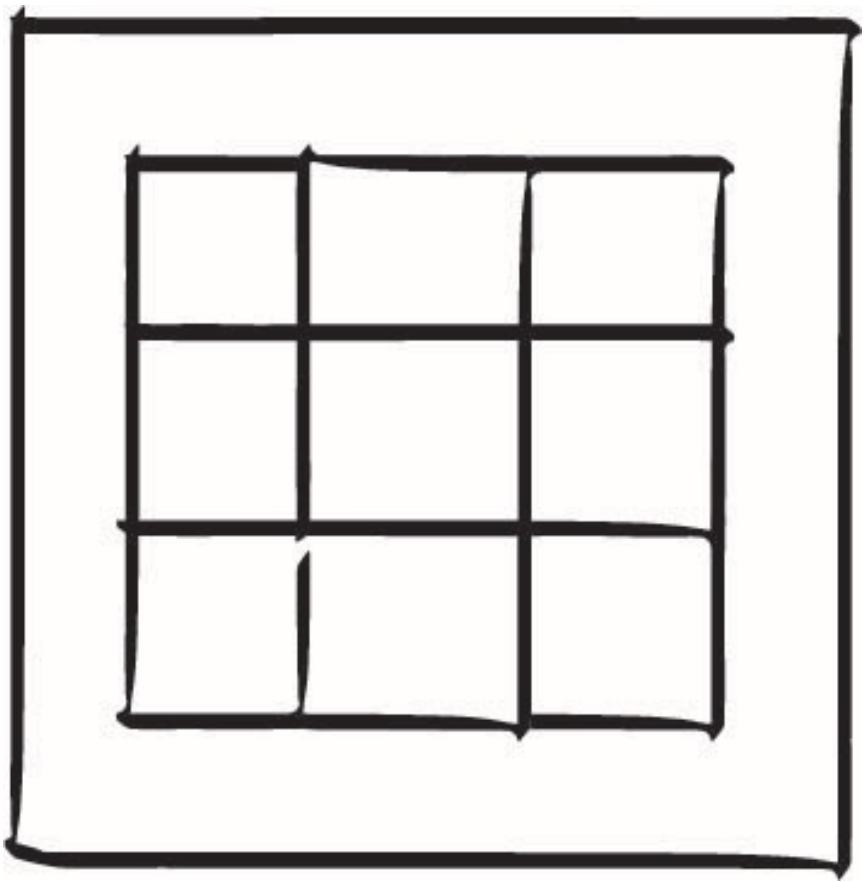

Listening to
the Landscape of Creation
A few stories
about quilters...

Here are just a few stories from
20th century quilters
who lived



Just stories, no photos.



Sally Jones

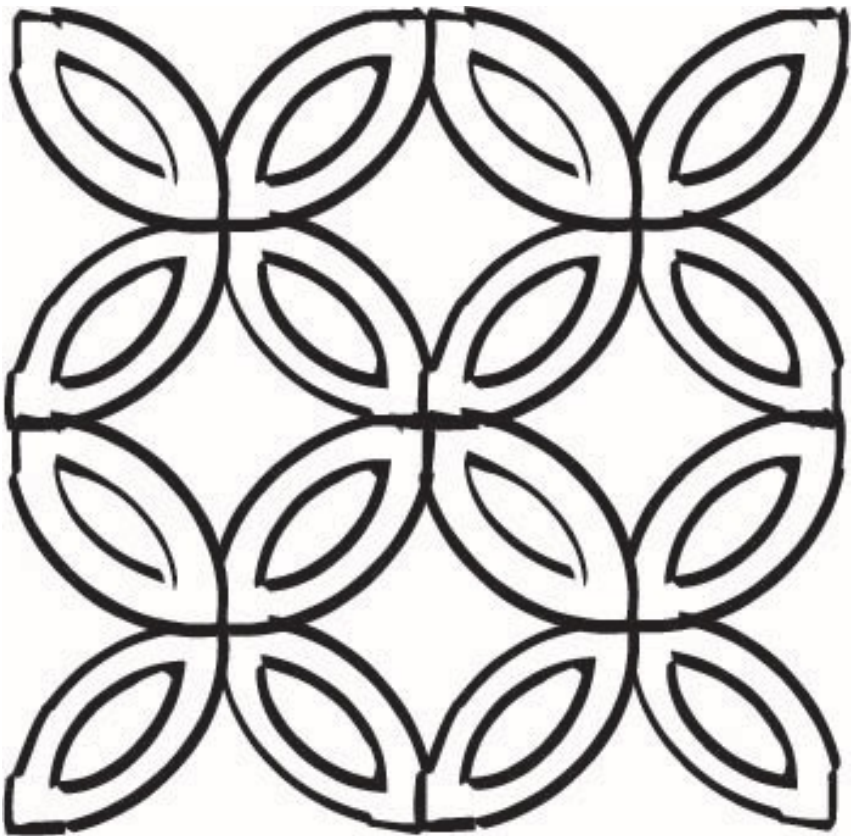
- 1913 -

As a child Sally spent a lot of time “dabbling around in the rag bag” looking for fabric scraps to make doll clothes from. Although she sometimes failed to get anything made, for Sally, the fun was in trying.

When she was 17, Sally began working for a woman who was a prolific quilter. She developed an interest in the craft, and with the help of her boss, pieced her first quilt in the star pattern.

Sally continued making quilts through the 1930s because she was “looking forward to getting married someday, and [she] had to have quilts.” At the beginning of a new marriage, it was important for a household to have a few quilts to start out with, to keep newlyweds warm through winter and to insulate forthcoming children in the first years of their lives.

When asked about the personal significance that quilts have for her and her family, Sally recalls an anecdote about her mother and father. Sally’s mother was also a prolific quilter, although she often made quilts exclusively from scrap material. Sally’s mother made a scrap quilt “on the order of a nine diamonds” towards the end of her life, which she gave to her husband by lying it over him in bed and saying “I want you to have that.” Later, after her mother died, Sally’s father went to live with her sister and took the quilt with him, keeping it with him until the very end of his life.



Ida Johnson

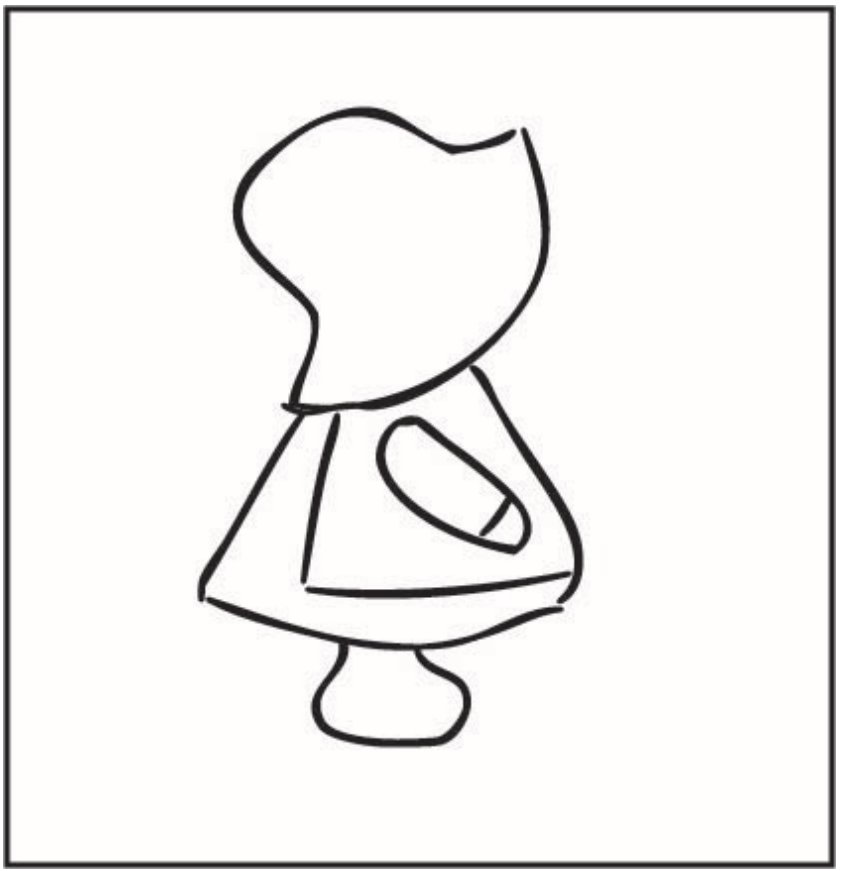
- 1894 -

Ida's mother first taught her to quilt when she was 13 years old. According to Ida, her mother "would never have a machine stitch on a quilt"—she exclusively pieced and quilted by hand, using fabric scraps left over from making clothing.

Ida remembers that when she was 14, a neighbor paid her a nickel to carry bread and eggs to the grocery store. She saved all her nickels until she had 35 cents, enough money for her mother to buy fabric for a new dress. Some of the fabric scraps from this dress were saved and later integrated into her mother's quilts.

To keep her family warm in their unheated home, Ida made quilts that used sheep's wool as batting. She says that quilts were much heavier than blankets and that you "couldn't get a heavy blanket, a real good warm blanket." Quilts were the only way to keep warm. In the last few years she quilted, Ida held quilting parties where she would invite neighbor women over to quilt a pieced quilt, and all she'd have to do was "fix them a good lunch."

Ida married her first husband in 1913. He was a farmer, and was a "big fan of orchards" and a skilled grafter. They had 48 apple trees that he maintained, and one tree with seven different kinds of apples on it! Ida recalls the difficulty of their lives, noting the effort and skill required to make soap and do laundry, and says, "There was a lot of hard work to anything you done back then."



Mary Smith

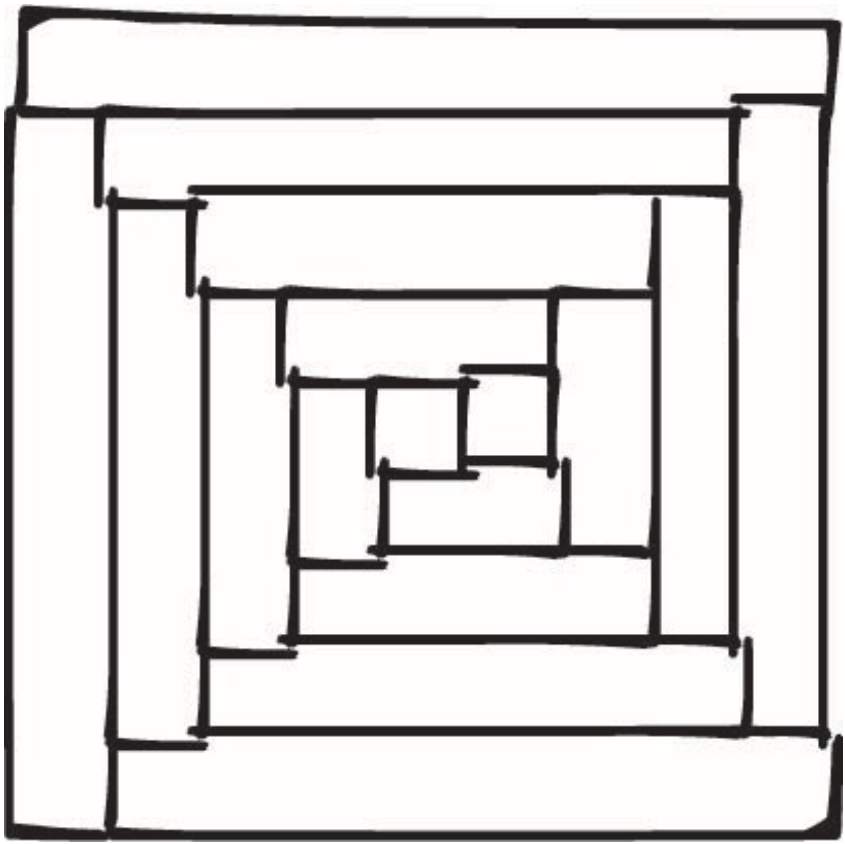
- 1897 -

Mary was born in 1897 and married in 1915. She had five children. Early in her marriage, Mary helped her mother-in-law make a quilt in the trip around the world pattern.

The first quilt Mary made by herself was a heavy; it was constructed from old woolens and tacked together. Mary and her husband used this quilt to keep warm as newlyweds in their drafty farm house.

Because she often helped her husband out in the fields ("just as a man would"), Mary didn't begin making a lot of quilts until after her husband died and she learned to quilt (instead of tack) quilts by watching her friends. Even then, she never bought fabric to make quilts—she always used scraps. According to Mary, you shouldn't mix new and old material, and you shouldn't use new material to patch a quilt.

Mary does not remember attending any quilting bees as a young woman, although sometimes ladies from her church would "get together at someone's house to quilt a quilt for a needy person." Instead, she remembers many community apple-peelings and corn shuckings, in which neighbors would help one another process food for preservation. According to Mary, there is a real art to peeling an apple without removing all the fruit. She says, "I believe there's an art in everything we do, isn't there?"



Joan Beavers

- 1912 -

Joan was born in 1912 in Dickenson county, Virginia. Both of her parents were born in log cabins. Her mother was a prolific quilter, making tacked quilts from linsey material (which has a linen warp and a woolen weft), as well as cotton and percale. Joan also remembers a special quilt made from velvet, which was used on the top of the bed (instead of under a more formal comforter).

Joan's father was killed in a mine when she was 7, and as a result, she married when she was 14 "because she wanted to get help for mother." At the time, Joan felt the weight of a convenience marriage, but looking back, she believes she did always love her husband. This feeling was magnified especially after his passing.

Joan taught herself to quilt and made mostly comforters because she did not know how to piece quilt tops. Now Joan mostly quilts so she has something to do in wintertime. When asked about the significance of quilts in her life, Joan says, "You know there's a meaning for everything, isn't there?"

During her married years, Joan remembers that neighbors often came to check on one another. She says she and her friends held lots of quilting bees and that everyone's husbands would also come along to help in the tobacco barn. Neighbors might have quiltings during the day, and then come back at night for dances "and square dance all night." According to Joan, "That was before all the love went away. They loved each other then."

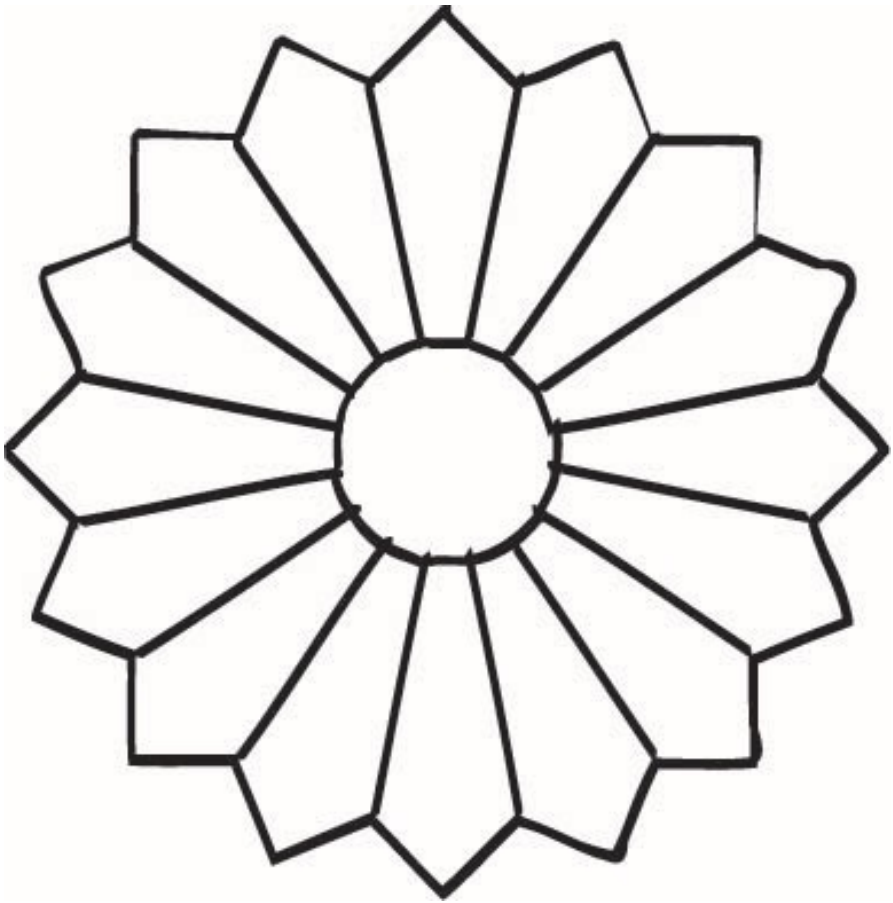
Kenny James

- 1904 -

Growing up, Kenny's mother sewed for all 11 of her children. He remembers that she would sometimes send him with his siblings to pick wool off of sheep that had died on an adjacent farm, then she would spin that wool and use it to knit socks. In addition, his mother also worked in the garden, raised chickens and turkeys, milked cows, and made quilts.

Kenny remembers that sometimes neighbors would come help his mother quilt. According to Kenny, one or two women might come over to help, stay and talk, then eat dinner. He says that they often talked about "their gardens and about their children, and about their sewing and how many beans they put up and how they pickled them and how they made krout and how they dried apples and all such as that… how much butter they had sold that week or month, and how many eggs."

Kenny learned to sew and quilt from his mother. He began to make quilts to sell after staying with a friend who noticed his sewing skills and asked him to quilt seven pieced tops. Now he makes lots of quilts and sells them to help pay his medical bills. Sometimes he also gives quilts away to "good people," like the woman who took care of his mother in old age.



Betsy Hart

- 1903 -

Growing up, Betsy's father grew much of the food for their family—she remembers that he even grew his own wheat. When her mother was married, a friend suggested that she try to make two new quilts every winter. There were nine people in Betsy's family, and her mother had to make enough quilts for each of their beds.

Before her marriage in 1925, Betsy's mother gave her two quilts filled with wool from her sister's sheep. When Betsy's mother got old, she began to quilt all the time because it was something to do while she sat during the day. Eventually Betsy's mother had to have her thumb removed, which limited her to making pieced quilt tops on the sewing machine. It was here, piecing quilts at the sewing machine, that Betsy's mother eventually had a heart attack and died.

Betsy recalls lots of quilting bees. In her mother's time, "You didn't have to invite people—if they knew you were quilting, they'd just come." After her husband died, Betsy remembers a young mother from her neighborhood who wanted to learn to quilt. Betsy helped her and a few other young women, and eventually formed a quilting circle with the young mothers and some of the other "old ladies from the neighborhood." Betsy says that all of the women would laugh and have a good time, and that "It's just something I guess—its like I said, we get together—the togetherness, you know I think the friendship means a lot."

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Compiled by Devon V. Johnson
from the transcripts of the Appalachian Quilt Project

If you would like to read more

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If you have questions

Please contact Devon at quilts@vt.edu

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