

Smoky Mountain Quilters of Tennessee: A Brief History

On June 2, 1980, thirty-four women sharing a common love of quilt making, met in the Oak Ridge, Tennessee living room of Allison Arnold, a transplanted middle Tennessee native who had been teaching quilting in her home since 1978. Spurred on by the enthusiasm of Mildred Locke of Bell Buckle, Tennessee and the newly formed Tennessee Valley Quilter's Association, Arnold set out to determine if there was interest in forming a group to promote fine quality quilting in the eastern part of the state. Smoky Mountain Chapter of TVQA (known later as Smoky Mountain Quilters of Tennessee) was a direct result of that meeting.

Shortly after the chapter's formation, members decided to participate in the Tennessee State Fair in Nashville, demonstrating quilting and answering questions pertaining to quilt making. It was noted that in 1980, the typical quilted entries were not of "high quality." The First Place prize was only \$3, and quilting teachers were prohibited from entering their quilts! The public was not being exposed to the excellent quilt making that was going on around the state.

Members of the state organization placed an emphasis on promoting fine quality quilting and encouraging good techniques in quilt making. Fair organizers were encouraged to establish a separate category for teachers. SMQ members also voted to take a major step forward and produce their own quilt show. Between August 1980 and April 1981, plans were under way for the First Annual Smoky Mountain Quilt Competition and Show. Judy Elwood served as show chairman, and although they had the support and assistance of other Smoky Mountain members, it was her drive, determination, and exuberance that got this first show off the ground. Three other volunteers—Suzanne Haase, Janice Sanders, and Glenys Nappo—were also extremely instrumental in planning this event. The quilt show was in the hands of four total strangers who had never even entered a show, much less produced one!

The American Museum of Science and Energy in Oak Ridge was the site of the inaugural show and featured 169 entries. Eighteen vintage quilts were also displayed. Competition categories for that first show included bed quilts, wall quilts, crib quilts, pillows, and cathedral window items. Entries were sent from across the state, and a handful of other states were represented as well. The quilt show was well received and became an anticipated event at the museum through 1990, when an Invitational Show featured previous winners from earlier competitions. This particular format was chosen due to the fact that SMQ members were absorbed in planning the production of the 21st Annual National Quilting Association Quilt Show in Knoxville. (One could say that ten years of preparation went into that show!) Judy Elwood (you'll remember her as the chairperson of SMQ's first show) was president of NQA in 1990.

Following the NQA event, representatives from the Dogwood Arts Festival in Knoxville requested the assistance from Smoky Mountain Quilters in producing their annual quilt show. After much evaluation, discussion, and soul-searching by its members, a decision was made to move the annual SMQ show to Knoxville. The show's duration changed from a ten-day event to one of seventeen days in order to coincide with the Dogwood Arts calendar. Coordinating volunteers for a 17-day event was quite an undertaking, not to mention a monumental expectation! But SMQ made sure it happened. The first five years of the Dogwood Arts/Smoky Mountain Quilters Quilt Show were at home in the Old City Hall in downtown Knoxville. After that the quilt show was held in the TVA West Tower office building in downtown Knoxville, just a few blocks from City Hall. The quilt show shared space with the Art Show and Photography Show. In 2006, the event moved to the new Knoxville Convention Center where the now 4-day event was held in conjunction with the House & Garden Show.

In 2007, Smoky Mountain Quilters mutually parted ways with the Dogwood Arts Festival. This decision restored the group's autonomy in producing the quilt shows, but these productions by countless volunteers throughout the years also came with scores of challenges. Perhaps the most difficult challenge has been fund-raising. During the early years of producing the quilt show, members earned most of the prize money by selling chances on an annual quilt made to be raffled for that year's show. The raffle quilts were highly prized by the public. Longtime member, Ginger Neusel, hosted Tuesday Bee in her Anderson County home where members gathered weekly to create the completely hand stitched bed quilts. Ginger was the perfect hostess, keeping the full size quilting frame set up in the house year round. She was gracious and fun to be around. It did not go unnoticed that her husband was the ever popular "Big Ed," owner of the highly touted Big Ed's Pizza Restaurant in Oak Ridge. And, yes, the quilters were occasionally treated to lunch, delivered in person by Big Ed himself!

The raffle quilt tradition ended when state authorities became embroiled in an investigation into bribery charges and illegal gambling activities involving political contributions. After the proverbial dust had settled, raffles, bingo, and other similar gaming opportunities came under close scrutiny. The games ceased, and new rules have been established in the years since. SMQ has a waiting period before applying for the ability to hold an annual raffle can be considered. Competition for sponsorships is widespread and marketing budgets of possible contributors have suffered for a variety of reasons. Costs of services and supplies have continued to rise through the years. The quest for accommodations for our exhibition and vendors have seen our search committee members develop new methodologies in ferreting out suitable space so the show can go on. Our show venues have included a variety of campus buildings on the grounds of community colleges and expo centers in our region. Our members can teach others the pros and cons of using tennis bubbles, basketball courts, federal, state, and city office buildings, museums, expo spaces, and the expensive civic center when the determination to hold a quilt show outweighs the less than desirable opportunities facing our volunteers.

The popularity of quilting has led to the formation of innumerable interest groups, guilds, quilt shows of all sizes, teaching venues, and online activities. With all that is available to quilt makers now, from supplies to lessons, from entry level classes to week-long courses taught by nationally and internationally acclaimed teachers, from the efforts of our locally owned shops to shops all over the globe, to Internet offerings in the comfort of our own homes, the level of talent has grown exponentially. Quilting styles and genres are without boundaries. Creativity abounds. Twenty-first century quilts are awe inspiring! The Covid-19 pandemic has played an enormous role in bringing the Internet to the forefront as the go-to means of engaging quilters and enabling them to maintain contact with their favorite activities and personalities until we can once again gather together in groups sorely missed by quilt makers everywhere.

Charity quilts continue to be made, and, weather permitting, quilting bees meet outdoors maintaining social distancing and wearing the latest home-sewn masks. Zoom meetings are arranged to conduct meetings, discussions, and visits. Exchanges of hand made kits for completed projects can be passed surreptitiously in public parking lots by mask-wearing members of the mother organization. And, let's not forget the ever popular social media for feeding our habits and sharing works both completed and in-progress.

We have, indeed, come a long way since 1980, when "quality quilting" was first becoming exposed and promoted! The members of Smoky Mountain Quilters believe they have shared in encouraging others to learn about quilts and quilting in the manner set forth by the founding members of our very special organization.