

KENTUCKY BARN QUILTS- by Gwenda Adkins

Watch closely now, because around each bend you might see a brightly colored giant quilt square hanging out with a barn. They've formed a lasting friendship along Eastern Kentucky's scenic two lane roads. Once only seen on the inside of homes giant quilt squares have come out of hiding to embellish the countryside as never before. The old creaking barn is smiling once again because people are paying attention to its build and strength. Once a focal point on the family farm, barns have recently been ignored; lost in this age of technology. Some of them are standing straighter; scars and holes are being mended. Yes, there is a movement in Kentucky to brighten the landscape and preserve some very important components of history.

What started this movement to showcase our cultural pride in such dramatic fashion? Nothing more than a daughter's love and respect for her Mother. When Donna Sue Groves and her mom, Nina Maxine Groves, bought a tobacco farm in Adams County Ohio Donna Sue told her mom "someday I will paint a giant quilt square on the end of the barn to honor you and your many years of quilting". Just a little bit later, Donna Sue did just that, she hung an eight foot by eight foot replica of Snails Trail on the end of the old tobacco barn. Little did she know she had dropped a small snowball at the top of the hill. People came from miles around to see the "barn quilt" so the arts council decided to hang them all round the county. That snowball started rolling south and carved its trail right into Eastern Kentucky and it's still rolling across the state. Now, Donna Sue was quite proud of her snowball, she called it her baby. All she asks is "If you plan a barn quilt project in your county, please remember my momma, Nina Maxine Groves.

In Kentucky you say "Don't get the cart before the horse" so let's back up and see what tobacco barns and quilts might mean to each other. For generations, tobacco was the primary crop raised on family farms in the Appalachian foothills. It grew big in the fertile ground and brought in enough money to pay the grocery bill and buy school clothes. The crop was so important that it had its own building; a tobacco barn. Older farmers tell us that not all barns are built the same, in the hills of Eastern Kentucky early barns were made of hand hewn logs but later they were constructed from rough lumber from the sawmill. The logs and lumber were usually oak because it is a very hard wood that lasts many years. In times past the rungs were made of small trees called poles which gave them the name "pole barns". The poles that formed the rungs were just far enough apart to hang a stick of tobacco between. The western part of the state had a different kind of barn because they grew a different kind of tobacco.

A barn might not be the most handsome building around but it certainly is strong. Why they've been known to house thousands of pounds of tobacco, let horses come inside to eat, provide a place to milk a cow, and sometimes allow chickens to roost way up high near the rafters. Hay was often stored in the barn loft and hens would find a cozy corner to lay eggs.

Now that beautiful quilt is another topic. It was made by hand with tiny little stitches joining pieces of fabric then layered and stitched together. Some were intricate works of art but others were large pieces of worn out blue jeans or flannel shirts sewn together then tacked. Either way they were a labor of love made by strong hard working women. A hand made quilt welcomed people to bed after a long hard day. They were first made for warmth from long cold winter nights and when the winds howled through the pine trees there was something very comforting about pulling a soft quilt tight around your neck.

Barns are just called barns but quilts got fancy names like goose in the pond or darting minnows or grandmother's flower garden; there are hundreds of them and each one looks different. Colorful fabrics from feed sacks, worn out or outgrown items of clothing, nothing went to waste. Between the layers might be a blanket or other padding that added warmth. With inventions such as the sewing machine, and changes in lifestyle like women working outside the home, and global markets, hand pieced quilts became scarce. Older quilters feared the art would be lost forever. Because tobacco farming is not the best way to make money on the farm any more the number of barns have also decreased. Many people were concerned they would disappear from the landscape.

But then from the north a snow ball rolled this way. The snowball convinced people to hang traditional quilt squares on their barns. This way the barn would have to stay to hold up the quilt square and the quilt square would have a permanent place to hang around and look as beautiful as it does gracing the bed that great-grandpa made. Perhaps he even made it in the barn.

Together a quilt and a barn form the perfect couple telling a story about a unique lifestyle in a unique place. They tell about happy times and hard times, about laughter and tears. So come, drive our beautiful two lane roads, see the deer eating the sweet grass, watch the forest change colors from spring into fall, experience the clear streams running down the mountain side, and keep an eye out, the next barn quilt might be just around the corner. Watch closely, or one might slip by....and you wouldn't want that to happen and neither would we.

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