

## History of Minnesota Quilters

*Respectfully compiled by Kathie Simon Frank*

Quilting was a normal part of daily life for both urban and rural Minnesotans from the time the state became a territory of the United States (1849). Records exist of quilts brought with the first white settlers from their homes in the east, and of the quilts exhibited in the first Minnesota State Fair in 1859. The Historical Society of Minnesota has records of small groups of women gathering in their communities and churches to share their craft. And the Ojibway in northern Minnesota had a well-established tradition of quilt-making, as well. But it wasn't until more than one hundred years after the state began to be settled that a small group of women in the Twin Cities desired a formal structured group where quilters could meet and learn from one another. Thus, begins the story of MQ.

In the 1970's quilting saw a resurgence, perhaps spurred by the upcoming U.S. Bicentennial. Everyone understood the value and importance of quilts for warmth in the home and clothing to protect against the cold, especially in a climate like Minnesota. They flocked to see exhibits of quilts that began to be shown and signed up for quilting classes to learn how to quilt like their grandmothers did. Among others, four quilt-makers in the Twin Cities were teaching quilting classes and sometimes exhibiting their quilts. They were Bonnie Ellis (Minneapolis), Pat Cox (Edina), Helen Kelley (Minneapolis), and Jeannie Spears (St. Paul). At least seven others were also visible as quilters, teachers, and exhibitors in the metro area, and, though most of them didn't know each other, they desired some kind of connection. These women lived all over the Twin Cities from Stillwater to Brooklyn Center, from Scandia to Apple Valley.

In the summer of 1976, Jeannie Spears invited four of her quilting friends, including Pat Cox and Bonnie Ellis, to drive with her to Michigan to attend the Bicentennial National Quilt Contest. You can imagine their stimulating conversations over that long drive as they shared their teaching techniques, methods, and challenges, and supported each other. They determined to extend their support by expanding their group. So early that fall, each invited friends who were teaching quilting to meet at Bonnie Ellis' house to continue the conversation.

This new group of eight arranged to meet again in the winter and the next spring (1977), each time extending their invitation to a wider group. Meanwhile, individually and in small groups, they found opportunities to collaborate on various quilting projects in the community. One of those, a Quilting Bee sponsored by the St. Paul YMCA where Jeannie Spears had been teaching quilting for several years, provided a mini quilt show with an exhibit of 30 quilts, offered quilting books available for loan from the public library, invited two quilt shop vendors (Country Peddler and Glad Creations) to sell fabric and tools, and set up small workshops and meeting times for quilting teachers and quilters to share ideas and learn from one another. The consensus was that they would all benefit from getting together regularly. At the same time, they floated the idea of organizing a national quilt show, which, as it happened, Jeannie Spears and Pat Cox had already taken some initial steps toward.

In summer 1977, several of these same women went to Lincoln, Nebraska for the Lincoln Quilt Symposium, where Carol Adelman, Pat Cox, Helen Kelley, and Jeannie Spears rented a vendor booth that they called "Minnesota Quilters." The shop Country Peddler (represented by two more Minnesota quilters) also had a vendor booth at the event. Another dozen or so Minnesotans independently attended the symposium, as well. The "Minnesota Quilters" booth representatives wore quilted vests. Pat Cox had embroidered "I'm a Minnesota Quilter" on a background of the outline of the State of Minnesota on her vest. The vendors further identified themselves by mounting their conference name badges on yellow patches with a silk-screened MQ on top. They issued those the patches to all the Minnesota attendees.

The following September, about a dozen quilters, including several of those who had been in Lincoln, met at the St. Paul YMCA to formalize their get-togethers. They chose to meet on the second Friday each month and they chose the name "Quilt Studio." Each month they scheduled a program with a group member as the speaker, time for Show and Tell, and time at the end for sharing, problem-solving, and questions from attendees. Twenty-seven women were on the earliest membership list. They had no other formal structure.

The group continued to meet at the YMCA for the next seven months. Each member of Quilt Studio had to pay Y dues. Many preferred their money to go to Quilt Studio. The group decided to break their ties with the YMCA, instead putting their money into their own quilt club. They set the dues at \$10/year. They agreed they needed some structure and identified the jobs necessary to run the organization. One after another, people volunteered to take on those responsibilities.

Agnes Leer and Norma Alquist volunteered to serve as program planners; Kay Bailey as secretary/treasurer; Marcie Ryan, membership; Helen Meehan and Trudy Finden, telephone committee; Bonnie Ellis, newsletter editor; Nell Bredeson, historian; and Helen Kelley, president. Jeannie Spears and Pat Cox did not take on roles as officers, as they were already actively organizing a national quilt show scheduled for January 1979, part of the St. Paul Winter Carnival.

On May 5, 1978, the next organizational meeting took place. Jeannie Spears and Pat Cox volunteered to draft a constitution and by-laws modeled on the Needlework Guild constitution. Kay Bailey located an attorney to review the draft and to research the requirements for non-profit status. This was important to ensure that the group's members would not be held personally responsible for the sizable financial commitment being assumed on behalf of the upcoming quilt show. The constitution and by-laws were adopted, and non-profit status established in fall 1978.

At this second meeting, the group chose its identity when it voted to order buttons showing the logo Pat Cox had included on the vest she made and wore at the Lincoln, NE symposium the summer before. It said: "I'm a Minnesota Quilter" on a line drawing of the State of Minnesota. Thus, the brand was born. Faith Kelley, Helen Kelley's daughter, designed the

button and placed the order. The first meeting was June 9, 1978, at the Northeast Community Library in Minneapolis.

In 1979, an evening meeting was added so those working daytime jobs could participate. The evening meetings were separate but had Board representation. The Board met primarily in the daytime, but occasional evening meetings were held to accommodate a wide range of representatives.

In 1981, Minnesota Quilters accepted as charter for founding members the 18 people who attended the first organizational meeting in April 1978: Carol Adelman, Norma Ahlquist, Kay Bailey, Sharon Bobgan, Nell Bredeson, Pat Cox, Ann Degen, Lyda DeHaven, Bonnie Ellis, Trudy Finden, Shirley Frantz, Helen Kelley, Agnes Leer, Helen Meehnan, Marcella Ryan, Marilyn Shimek, Jeannie Spears, Sue Stein. They added Joanne Holzknicht, Pat Emmings, Donella Hiar, Carol Laitala, and Elaine Strese, as well, who had all been part of various meetings leading up to the break with the YMCA.

Success was evident immediately. By April the next year, Minnesota Quilters registered 250 as members, and by the end of 1981, there were over 800 members. Members were primarily from Minnesota, but, even then, members joined from other states, too.

Knowing and understanding Minnesota Quilters' history is critical to understanding why some of the organization's traditions are resistant to change. It's useful to learn about this history. May we benefit from the thought, energy, expertise, and care that has been put into making Minnesota Quilters what it has become today. May we grow from these good roots that have been established for 42 years.

Information for this history was provided by Jeannie Spears and an article that was published in the Spring 1982 issue of Ladies Circle Patchwork Quilts.