



MANY ENJOYABLE HOURS Cheryl Votapka has spent quilting since she first learned the art in a class in 16 years ago. Many of her quilts have been donated to charities, including the Ronald McDonald House, Last Indian Raid Museum and Habitat for Humanity.

Woman loves quilting

By MARY LOU OLSON

What began as a love for sewing and all kinds of needlework as a small child turned into a talent that has produced nearly 100 beautiful quilts, clothes for her family, cheerleading outfits, prom and homecoming dresses, DCHS Singers outfits, costumes for plays and musicals and more.

Cheryl Votapka of Oberlin says that when she was a girl, she spent much time with her grandmother, Jennie Bradley, while her mother, Odene (Bradley) Koehler, was working.

"My grandmother was well-known for her needlework and sewing skills," she said, "and she often let me play on her old treadle Singer sewing machine, which had been converted into an electric, before my parents bought me my own machine.

"I took three years of home economics in high school and earned the State Homemaker Degree in Future Homemakers of America."

Mrs. Votapka said she graduated from Decatur Community High School in 1962, attended Fort Hays State University, then married Dale Votapka on Aug. 8, 1965. They have lived on the farm north of Oberlin, in a house built by her husband's grandfather in 1916 where her husband was born, since then.

"I did mostly garment sewing for many years," she said, "and made most of my own clothes, as well as clothes for our three daughters."

She said that somehow word got around about her skills. Soon she was asked to make clothes for others. Although she never wanted to have a business, she said, she just enjoyed doing favors for people.

When she made outfits for school functions, she said, she never charged, but instead just told the students that they could repay her by helping someone else with whatever talent they had. She made dresses for members of the handbell choir which she directed at the United Church for several years.

"I tried quilting when my girls were small," she said, "since I had lots of scraps, but the only thing I knew about it was what I had watched my grandmother do.

"I spent two evenings cutting squares with a cardboard template and scissors, but when I tried to sew them together I didn't have a clue what to do, and it seemed silly to cut up good fabric then sew it back together again."

Mrs. Votapka said that she didn't try quilting again until 1990, when her sister-in-law, Joy Votapka, talked her into taking a class with her. By that time the rotary cutter had been introduced, she said, and it made all the difference in the world.

"One of our daughters was in college at the time and asked if I could make her a small quilt," she recalled. "She chose the Star of Bethlehem, which is not recommended for a beginner, but I gave it a try and also did my first hand quilting on it. My daughter has mounted it under glass and it hangs in her new home in Lawrence. It is quite humbling to look at my first work and compare it to my work today."

She said that after becoming a member of the Last Indian Raid Museum board over 10 years ago, she started putting some of her sewing skills to work with gift items to bring money to the museum.

Before long, a group of women got together to do the hand quilting. Alice Vernon, Irene Ayers, Eva Bryan and Alvina Unger were among the first museum quilters, she said.

"We would do the handwork on a quilt for a donation to the museum," she said. "Then I started piecing a top for them to quilt and we used it for a raffle quilt during Mini-Sapa Day as a benefit for the museum. We are still doing it today, and the group includes Dorothy Moore, Eula Juenemann, Eloise Smith and Joy Votapka."

In 1989, the couple bought their first motor home and started doing a little traveling. She said that she always takes her sewing machine on their trips and in her spare time, she always works on something.

"In 1996, I was diagnosed with cancer and through the surgeries and chemo treatments, my sewing was my salvation," she said. "We would go to Wichita and stay a week, then come home for three weeks, and the sewing machine always went with us. This was our routine for six months. I completed four large quilts and a dozen baby quilts, besides several crocheted afghans during that time to keep my mind busy."

When their three daughters married, Mrs. Votapka said, she made not only their wedding dresses, but the attendants' dresses as well.

Mrs. Votapka belongs to the Needles and Pins Quilt Guild, but said she doesn't claim to be an expert on quilting.

"I know enough to be dangerous and have a world of fun," she said. "Dale has always supported me in my passion for sewing and never grumbles when I find a fabric shop to explore in our travels across the country."

The couple retired from farming in 1998, she said, and when they travel, she takes three machines — one for machine embroidery, one for classes or quilt-alongs, and her serger. She said they have become snowbirds and go to Tucson, where she is involved in two quilting groups, for the winter.

"We make and donate quilts for Ronald McDonald (House)," she said, "and each child receives a quilt of his own when going into the hospital. The larger quilts are used for the beds in the Ronald McDonald houses. Our other group makes quilts for such charities as Habitat for Humanity and abused women's shelters. On Sunday afternoons, four of my friends and I make quilts for the Quilt for a Cause in Tucson, with proceeds from the auctioned quilts going for breast cancer research."

Mrs. Votapka said she also helps teach a machine embroidery class, where students make quilt blocks that are then made into quilts for charity.

She'd like to pass her passion and talent on, she said, but while they appreciate her work, the interest in sewing doesn't seem to have taken with her daughters.

"Sewing is just something I like to do," she said, "but I can understand that it is an aggravation for those who don't care to do it. All of my girls learned to sew, but they don't have a passion for it like I do."

The Votapkas have eight grandchildren, seven boys and a girl.

"Hopefully," she said, "my one little granddaughter will inherit some of my passion for sewing just as I did from my grandmother."



MAKING ALL THE CLOTHES for her daughters was one benefit of Cheryl Votapka's sewing talent. In their matching outfits were (from left) Beth, Luanne and Pam Votapka when they were in school in Oberlin. Their mother also made many outfits for high school students. The Morning Star Quilt, finished recently by Mrs. Votapka, shows the perfection she has developed in her work since she made her first quilt in 1990. This is one of nearly 100 quilts she has completed.

