



Patchwork of Memories

Follow the journey of constructing a crazy quilt to honor the memory of a loved one.

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Photo by Legacy Imagery

As tribute to her Scottish ancestry, McKay used a skirt brought back from Scotland in the border as well as Celtic knots for the quilting. A Method to the Madness

Back home, I consulted a local seamstress who urged me to start over, using the foundation method. This technique calls for using squares of fabric such as muslin, onto which the quilter sews one piece of material at a time. This suggestion proved to be just the ticket and ensured that all my quilt blocks would be the same shape and size. One advantage of this, I would discover, is that individual 12-inch squares are easy to carry around and work on, as compared to an ever-expanding amoeba. Occasionally, I would have to turn a raw edge under and sew it to the foundation by hand, especially when working with circles. Once I got the hang of sewing my pieces onto a foundation, I could make a block in two to three hours. It was fun to sort through mountains of material—much of it from scarves or ties picked up for next to nothing at thrift stores—and decide which colors and textures looked best together. This was also the stage at which I often incorporated ribbon, binding, doilies and other bric-a-brac that added interest.

A Firm Foundation

Learn to make your own quilt square with these foundation method instructions. Although I sometimes found the engineering of quilt blocks to be challenging, embellishing them proved far more time-consuming. This is where I attempted to illustrate Mom's various preferences, pastimes, memories and objects of affection; for example, a favorite kind of candy bar, playing croquet, reading, falling asleep to the sound of rain on a tin roof, fun vacations or a childhood pet. I started with a long list of ideas and then looked for drawings that would depict them. At first I tried to trace these, but I found that the ink from the tracing paper did not transfer well. In the end, I "drew" almost everything freehand, studying a picture and approximating it as best I could with needle and thread. I had to buy or borrow books that showed how to do various embroidery stitches. Being a perfectionist, I sometimes got frustrated and removed many bad first tries, but part of the beauty of crazy quilts is that they're busy and irregular, hiding all kinds of mistakes.

Somewhere along the line, it occurred to me that my quilt was turning into a wall hanging; it would be simply too fragile to subject to regular wear and tear, not to mention cat claws. Besides embroidery floss, I had ventured into buttons, beads, jewelry and other three-dimensional objects. Many of the doodads were new, but some were old and had sentimental value, such as the tiny, antique dress pin Mom gave me decades before. Well into the project, I also decided to appliqué old black-and-white photographs of my mother, the people who were most special to her, and the house where she was born and raised. After several failed attempts to print these photos on fabric myself, I enlisted the help of a graphic designer at a custom embroidery shop. The resulting images were much crisper than the ones my laser printer had produced.

Photo by Legacy Imagery

A group effort enabled McKay to immortalize her mother's memory in a quilt that is near and dear to her heart. I started my crazy quilt in 1999 while working as a freelance writer and kept at it fairly consistently until accepting a full-time job in 2004. Time constraints caused me to set the quilt aside for almost three years, until a coworker urged me to pursue a creative endeavor. I returned to the quilt in earnest, determined to bring this tribute to my mother to completion.

In the beginning, I thought I would be finished when I got to the bottom of my list of ideas—yet my list kept growing. I saw that I would never run out of things I wanted to portray about Mom. In the end, size dictated how many blocks I would do: I wanted to put a black border between and around them, so I stopped at 16 blocks. I spent many evenings embroidering while watching TV, often when my husband was away on business. "Working" on the quilt was not a chore. In fact, it was a comfort and a pleasure to me, as though my mother was keeping me company and we were doing the quilt together after all.



Entering the home stretch, I turned again to my friend Rachel for advice. We each drove many hours to meet midway, where we rented a log cabin for the weekend, walked, talked and pondered my quilt. I showed her my wool plaid skirt, made from cloth brought back from Scotland. My mother had always been so proud of her McKay ancestry, and I wanted to incorporate the clan tartan. But how? The vertical and horizontal lines struck me as too regimented for a whimsical, playful crazy quilt. I wondered if I should just use the plaid material for the backing. Instead, Rachel came up with the perfect solution: Take the skirt apart and cut the cloth into strips on the bias (diagonally). Then use them to create a narrow border (or “stopper,” in quilting lingo) around all the blocks. It would be, Rachel said, an eye-catching way to frame the blocks and a kind of salute to Mom’s heritage. I loved this suggestion.

As I approached the finish line, my husband and I moved again across the country and into a new home. I snatched moments for the quilt whenever I could, such as while riding in the car, filling the blocks with as many memories as they could hold and embroidering along every seam, as Rachel had recommended. Finally it was time to sandwich the top (front), middle (batting) and bottom (backing) together. All along, I had wanted Rachel to do this, the actual quilting, with her giant machine rather than tackle it myself by hand. Besides adding a subtle beauty to the quilt, this decorative sewing would serve to stabilize it and make the borders (or sashing) between blocks line up better. At my request, Rachel stitched Celtic knots around the outer border and wrote Mom’s name—Betty McKay Turner—in the border, too. Rachel’s colleague, Pamela Cauble, created the binding.

Despite its many imperfections, I am deeply satisfied with our crazy quilt. It turned out to be a group effort, not just mine. Although my mother has been gone for 18 years, this quilt is one way I have kept her with me—both while it was taking shape and now that it is nearly done. (I still need to explain aspects of the quilt on a computer-generated cloth label and appliqué it to the back.) A decade in the making, it’s not the practical bed covering Mom might have had in mind. But, like the tree I eventually placed near her grave, it is a celebration of her life and an expression of abiding love. h

About the Author: Erin McKay, her husband, a dog and two cats live in a stone and strawbale house in McElmo Canyon, Colo., near the Four Corners. (Two horses live outside.) Now that she has finished her quilt, Erin hopes to try Navajo weaving.