



Quilting Reflections

Timeless Stitches — Quilt Capital of Kansas

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A new year! What will it bring? What did past years bring? January 3, 2024, marked the 35th birthday of Quilters' Paradise as we know it. The new year provides the opportunity to reflect on the changes that have made Quilters' Paradise the business that it is today.

I was an avid seamstress. I enjoyed making knockoffs of popular clothing. But sometimes the fabrics I needed were not available. I longed to have a fabric shop so I could find those supplies and fabrics. Eventually I met Antoinette Brecheisen who had a small fabric shop in her rural basement. She loaned me her serger to try to see if I liked using it. That opened a whole new world to me! Antoinette was wanting to close out her little shop, so I bought some of her inventory. The fabric I bought was high-quality interlock knit and some wool blends from the Amana Colonies. My plan had been to manufacture pre-teen fashions, but this was before the internet and Etsy stores. I couldn't figure out how to market my products.

June 1986 there was a change in my business plan—I used those knits to make custom-made knit wear, sewing on my kitchen table, and marketed the garments at parties patterned after Tupperware parties and called the business Cygnet Fashions, named for the ugly duckling. The business grew—I couldn't sew fast enough. I hired my mother to help me sew. For a while I cut and did the parties and Mom sewed. Then I hired a friend to help sew. When we passed 3,000 knit garments, I stopped counting. Only one customer came to my house to buy fabric. She had been one of Antoinette's customers and knew where to find those wonderful quality knits.

It became apparent that if the business was to grow, I needed a storefront. One of my friends who had been doing some of the sewing, Paula Donohue, suggested that I talk to Larry Joiner who had an Italian restaurant at 713 High Street. Larry had divided the main floor of the building into the restaurant and two boutiques. Upstairs was a judo dojo. I needed a part-time helper to help me be sure that the schedule was covered whenever the boutique was open. A friend of my daughter's (now my son-in-law, Paul) suggested his mother, Kathy. I expanded my fabric inventory to include some cotton fabric since quilting was gaining popularity. We opened the doors on Shirts, etc. at 713 8th Street in late February 1988. The boutique was so small that when we had a customer, either Kathy or I had to step out into the hallway.

Later that year Mrs. Stiles, who owned Baldwin Dry Goods, decided to retire. She had a going out of business sale and John and I bought the building on December 1, 1988. We did some basic repair and remodeling and opened the doors on Cygnet Fashions and Fabrics on January 3, 1989. My vision was a general fabric



store. We continued to make custom knit shirts and sweatshirts and I started doing alterations for Betty B's, the dress shop next door where El Patron is now located. As time passed, the fabric for garments sold very slowly while the interest in quilting cottons increased. About three years after I opened the store, some of my friends and I organized The Maple Leaf Quilters Guild which is still active and puts on the Maple Leaf Quilt Show during the Maple Leaf Festival.

Then I had the opportunity to purchase Betty B's. The dress shop had been in business for about 45 years at that time. We cut a doorway in the wall between the two stores and worked back and forth for a few years. Then the owner of the Betty B's building decided he wanted to sell the building and I decided to combine the two businesses in the Cygnet Fashions building. That is when Cygnet Fashions and Fabrics changed her name to Quilters' Paradise!



Times changed. Some of my regular Betty B's customers retired from their office jobs. People started dressing more casually. I phased out the Betty B's inventory and took down the Betty B's sign. I thought about having a "50th Anniversary – Going Out of Business" sale but was concerned that customers would think the quilt shop had closed as well, so the change was made quietly.

Even though the shop was focused on quilting, I still sewed. I made wedding dresses for both my daughters, my daughter-in-law, and my niece. My daughter-in-law's dress was especially challenging. I knocked off the bodice from one designer dress and paired it with the skirt from another dress by the

same designer. There were 11,000 hand-sewn pearls on that dress! Friends and relatives pitched in to help sew those pearls in place. Having the shop made it possible for me to order what I needed to make those dresses. I got the (machine washable) satin from the same mill that made the interlock knit. Since then, the mill has sold and neither product is available now.

My granddaughters learned to sew garments and make quilts at the shop. My grandson made a quilt, but his quilting career ended when he got big enough to drive the tractor.

Our first area quilt shop hop was held in spring 1999 and has been an annual event ever since, except 2020 because of covid. A holiday-themed fall shop hop was later added. We also take part in the All Kansas and Nebraska Shop Hop in April and May, with 2024 being its third year.

In 2019 the Kansas State Senate signed a proclamation declaring Baldwin City to be the "Quilt Capital of Kansas." This request to the Senate was inspired by roadside signs declaring Wilson to be "The Czech Capital" and Lindsborg to be "The Swedish Capital." Quilting has been important to Baldwin City for a long time—we are grateful to Enola Gish, Betty Hagerman, and a host of other quilters for establishing a firm foundation for the craft. The Quilt Capital of Kansas initiative became a solid partnership between Quilters' Paradise and the Lumberyard Arts Center in 2020 with the making of thousands of face masks during Covid. The partnership has evolved to include an annual quilting/textile art gallery exhibit and speaker, as well as multiple quilting and textile art classes held at the Lumberyard Arts Center. The Quilt Capital Committee is carrying on the quilting work by sponsoring free open sewing opportunities and other textile related activities each Wednesday at the Lumberyard Arts Center from 10am to 3pm.

2024—let's see what you bring!