

An Itinerant Quilter in the 21st Century

In the 19th century, an itinerant weaver or dressmaker would live with a family for days or weeks, work in their house, and then move on to another family. In the summer of 2003, I traveled half way across America to make a quilt for my cousin and it was all made possible by the latest information, communication, and transportation technologies.

I live outside Boston and volunteer in the library/resource center at the New England Quilt Museum in Lowell, Massachusetts. My cousin Carol lives outside St. Louis, Missouri where both she and her husband Mark are high school teachers. Twenty years ago, she promised to make a Jacob's Ladder quilt for Mark as a reward if he quit smoking. He did quit smoking but she got too busy teaching and raising two children to make his quilt. Each time I went to see her we discussed that quilt again but did nothing about it. Since 1986, I've taken my Singer Featherweight sewing machine to 8 different Caribbean islands and pieced at least 18 quilt tops while my husband went SCUBA diving on our vacations. So I knew that some summer I could come visit her and get that quilt started.

In May, my husband said his boss was sending him to a conference in California in early July and he would be changing planes in St. Louis. He suggested that I come along and spend three days with Carol, rejoining him on his return trip. He didn't know about the quilt we had discussed, but for me that was the best part. I called Carol and she was pleased that I could come when all four of them would be out of school. I told her I wanted to start her quilt on my visit and reassured her that I would not leave it for her to finish another 20 years from now. I made my plane reservation by phone, charged it to my credit card, and received an e-ticket by e-mail.

I had recently bought Electric Quilt software so I began designing the quilt on my computer. Fortunately, the pattern had been chosen years ago or it would have taken much longer to choose between thousands of blocks. They decided their quilt would be the same size as their down comforter, in soft contemporary colors, and would be used in the summer. I sent Carol several drawings by e-mail and she preferred the simplicity of the layout with alternate plain blocks. With only 13 large pieced blocks, the quilt top would be quick to assemble.

Next we discussed colors by e-mail. I introduced her to Bali batik fabrics by e-mailing her the website for Hancock's of Paducah and she replied with the links to the fabrics they liked best. She said that Patches Etc Quilt Shop in St. Charles, Missouri is located between the airport and her house. I found its website and e-mailed Ann Watkins-Hazelwood, the owner, to tell her about our project in advance. I did some more drawings of the quilt, this time in black, white and two grays since we had no way of knowing what color fabrics we'd choose until I arrived. After Carol chose the best drawing, I did all the yardage calculations ahead of time. We were all set.

I knew I needed very little clothing for my short trip but my bag weighed about 50 pounds with all my tools and the 2 heavy notebooks about quilting and genealogy I took to share with Carol. I had also put the foot pedal and everything else possible in my checked luggage to make the sewing machine case as light as possible. It's a good thing suitcases come with big wheels these days. Since

An Itinerant Quilter in the 21st Century

the case fits nicely under the seat, I carried my Featherweight onto the plane. This time I was careful to put the small box of attachments in my checked luggage. On a trip to Grand Cayman last year, I learned the increased security rules meant that the little screwdriver in that box of tools had to be shipped separately from the machine. (see side bar for packing list)

Portable sewing machine
Extension cord
Extra bobbins
Rotary mat
rotary cutter
extra blades
rotary rulers in all sizes
drafting tape to highlight lines on rotary ruler
a ziplock bag full of thread spools in many colors
travel iron
Small spray bottle for ironing
pins
scissors
thread snips
seam ripper

When Carol picked me up at the St. Louis airport on Tuesday, we drove straight to the quilt shop for fabric. We chose Hoffman's Bali Hand Dyed Batik from the Watercolor Brights Collection called "Pastel Sunflowers" and three other coordinating fabrics in soft yellow, raspberry pink, and bright turquoise. If it had not been so hot and humid, I would have loved to browse among the many shops on Main Street in St. Charles. Perhaps I'll return at a cooler time of year.

At Carol's house I had a guest bedroom and bathroom in the finished basement. We set up a bridge table and her ironing board in the adjacent recreation room next to their treadmill, weight machine, and recumbent bike. I borrowed the secretarial chair from Mark's desk. The house is centrally air-conditioned and the recreation room also had a radio, TV, and small fan. We tested all the fabrics for color-fastness and washed and ironed them that afternoon. I met Domino, their dog, and Siskal and Ebert, their cats who found my quilting activity very entertaining. After dinner I shared my portfolio of past quilting projects with Carol and her family.

On Wednesday morning, I began cutting out patches and showed Carol how to use the rotary tools that had been invented since she made a few quilts in the 1970s from Beth Gutcheon's "Perfect Patchwork Primer." While watching the same shows I like at home on their cable TV, I began piecing the quilt blocks. I found that my sewing machine would only go very slowly no matter how hard I pressed on the foot pedal. Fortunately, Carol had just bought a brand new Singer Featherweight 132 Q so I switched to her machine for the rest of the visit. After going out for a great Missouri barbeque dinner we spent the evening looking over the family tree I'd created by computer.

An Itinerant Quilter in the 21st Century

On Thursday I continued piecing and had all the blocks done before supper. Instead of watching cable TV, I found their local National Public Radio station and listened to more familiar programs while I worked. Carol and I talked about our families, work, and also discussed batting and machine quilting patterns for her quilt. Meanwhile, I was able to stay in touch with my husband in California by cell phone and continue my job of answering research questions sent to the Quilt Museum with web mail on Carol's computer.

On Friday morning after packing up and making a sandwich for the plane, I had just enough time to sew all 25 blocks together. I cooled off my travel iron on my wet washcloth and packed it into my suitcase at the last possible moment. Carol drove me to the airport where my husband joined me at the gate and told me all about his trip. Since the quilt top was in my checked luggage, he didn't get to see it until we got home. On Saturday evening I sewed the borders on the quilt top and on Sunday morning I mitered the corners of the borders.

The following week I bought a turquoise king size sheet for the back of the quilt and showed the color to Carol via the K-Mart website. We also used the World Wide Web and e-mail to jointly select a machine quilting pattern. When I contacted several machine quilters in my area, I found that none were willing to use the sheet for the back since the thread count was 250. Fortunately, I found a turquoise print fabric for the back and was able to return the sheet. My friend Julie Crossland in Hudson, NH did the machine quilting on her short-arm machine in a pattern that suggests waves on a tropical beach. I bound the quilt in the sunflower batik fabric that matches the background, made a label telling how the quilt was made, and sent it off to Missouri.

Illustrations available for magazine article if published:

1. Photo of completed quilt
2. Digital Photo of Carol and I in temporary workshop
3. Math sheet done in Word
4. Drawing of quilt from Electric Quilt