

BARN QUILTS  
AND THE  
AMERICAN  
QUILT TRAIL  
MOVEMENT

Suzi Parron  
with  
Donna Sue Groves

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# the trail begins

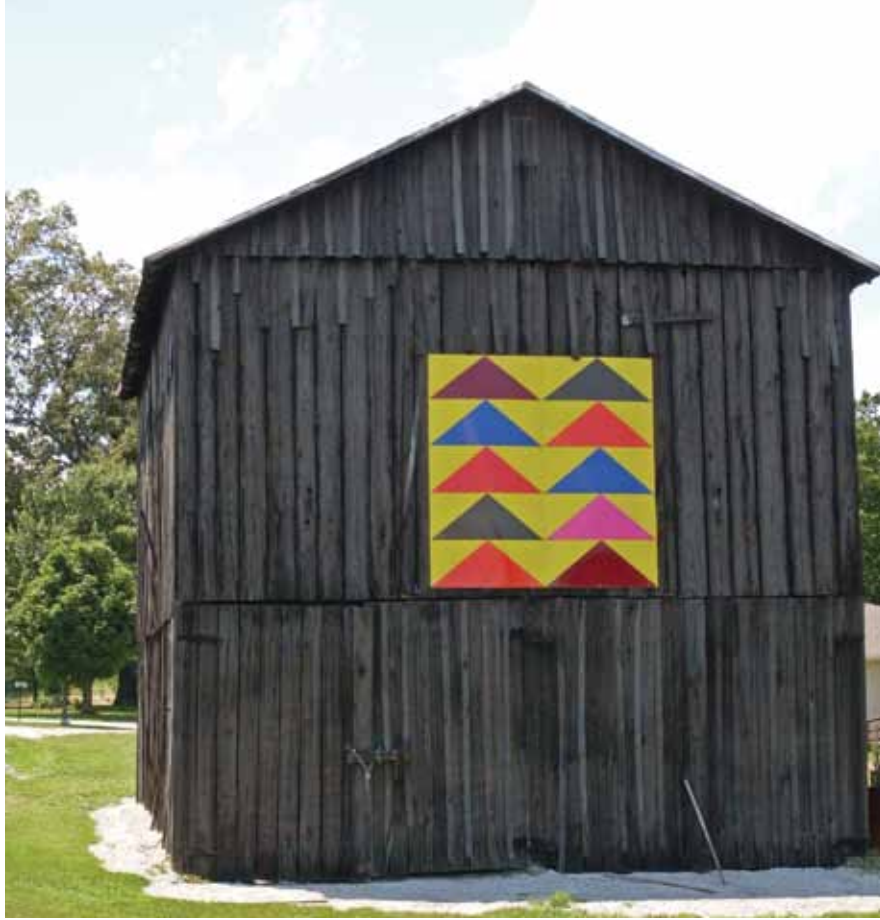
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AS I ROUNDED a bend on a Kentucky two-lane, a flash of bright color startled my road-weary eyes: a large yellow sign, with two painted rows of pink, red, blue, and purple triangles, affixed to the side of a small dark-planked barn. I slowed for a moment. The intricate geometrical design and the placement of colors and shapes looked exactly like a Flying Geese quilt square! As I crept along, a glance back revealed that the opposite side of the barn was similarly decorated, but with a Pine Tree pattern. I pulled onto the grassy shoulder and stepped out of the car for a better look. Those were definitely quilts. Standing alone in a strange place, four hundred miles from home, I felt that I belonged and was welcomed. The familiar images called up memories of family and childhood, of things long in the past yet a vital part of my identity. With thirty miles to drive and a tent to pitch before nightfall, I hurried on, but the desire to know more had begun to pull at me already.

Throughout the night, through the next day's hiking and kayaking, my mind kept returning to those quilts. I just couldn't leave the area without knowing their story. With my late afternoon's leisure put aside and my black Labrador mix, Gracie, in the backseat eager for adventure, I retraced the dusty gravel that led to the highway. I stopped at a BP gas station and inquired, hoping to solve the mystery without having to retrace my trip all the way to Cadiz. A leisurely discussion of the lottery results was paused just long enough to permit consideration of my question. No one knew why those signs were there, but my informants acknowledged that they sure were pretty. The owner of the thrift store didn't live in that direction. Every couple of miles, it was the same story—"I don't know anything about 'em,

My first barn quilt—  
Flying Geese



but I like 'em.” There seemed to be no option but to drive back to the first barn. “This had better be good,” I thought. “Sixty miles round-trip to ask somebody about a barn.”

Being an intrepid soul, I pulled onto the gravel driveway of the farm and took a few photos of the barn right away. Someone was barely visible behind the house, seemingly oblivious to my arrival. “Hello,” I called, “I apologize for trespassing, but I wonder if you could tell me about your barn.” I hovered near the car, in case the owner came out with a shotgun or let loose a dog, but no quick getaway was necessary. Belenda Holland appeared, apologizing for having to stop to empty her hands of laundry. The khaki Bermuda shorts and Teva sandals looked more California than Kentucky, but the accent was pure country. Her tanned face crinkled when I told her how far I had driven to have my question answered. “Well,” she said, “someone had the idea of putting quilt squares on barns to celebrate the art of rural America. Everyone thinks of agriculture and the men hard at work; we wanted to recognize the women’s role and remind folks that we have always produced art as well.”

Belenda didn’t need to remind me of the significance of quilting. I grew up in Florida, where kerosene stoves were the only source of heat, so quilts were often part of my winter bedding. Dozens of quilts, most decades old and worn to a

comfortable softness, filled a hall closet outside the bedroom where I slept at my grandmother's. The first night was the best: carefully unfolding a half dozen or so, placing them one by one on the bed with each one squared with the one beneath so that they would remain just so, and wriggling underneath. The warmth created by my great-grandmother's hands insulated me from both the winter chill and the uncertain world.

As the years passed, those quilts, faded and torn, mended by many hands, became the last connection to my great-grandmother and her folkways, to my cultural heritage. Many a friend has scoffed at my insistence that my quilts must be made by hand, but quilting is not simply a means of producing a bed covering. The craft is at once a creative outlet and a reminder of who I am—a child of the rural South.

That small Kentucky farm seemed my own personal heaven: the art of my great-grandmother on public display, preserved for all time. Belenda directed me toward Highway 91, where about ten more quilt squares were hung on barns. This detour would take me another twenty-plus miles out of the way and leave me to return to camp after dark. None of that mattered. It was as if I had family scattered throughout the countryside, waiting for me to come by, to see how they lived and to share our stories. To stop and visit each seemed the natural thing to do. I set off toward Hopkinsville and the beginning of what would become my first quilt trail.

Route 91 yielded another quilt barn almost immediately, this one a massive gray building with a peaked roof and a bold red and blue star on the front. Some of the barns were set far back from the road, and many of the quilt squares were hung on barn sides, so eight miles' worth of barns had to be carefully scrutinized. Once my attention was drawn to the structures themselves, I was struck by the amazing variety of barns that I encountered. Some were long abandoned and fallen to one side, barely held together by masses of ivy. Others were a well-preserved testament to the hard work of the current owners. Most of the barns were separated from the houses by fields, but on a few farms the two were side by side. In contrast to the horizontal boards on the houses, those on the barns hung vertically. Why place the boards on one building one way and those on another the opposite? With the question filed away, the hunt for barn quilts continued.

The variety of quilt patterns was as great as the variety of barns. Most were simple geometric designs painted in bright contrasting colors, often red and blue, which made them easily visible, even if the barn was far from the road. Although cloth quilts often include shades that are more muted, bright yellows and greens and even the purple and pink of the barn in Cadiz most readily created the desired effect. Some designs, though reminiscent of my beloved scrap quilts, were more difficult to make out, as they were more detailed and painted in pastels. Of course, to an already captivated mind, each discovery was a sweet surprise.

One in particular stood out; with over sixty pieces, it would have been challenging to stitch, much less to paint.

Near the main road, the quilt squares appeared less often, and my attention returned to the barns. The vertical alignment of those planks fascinated me. My fixation might have been pushed aside if not for the connection with the quilts. I pulled in next to a roadside shed where a farmer worked on a tractor that appeared to be older than I but which his confident manner indicated would be running momentarily. He stopped and wiped the sweat from his eyes, applying another streak of grease to an already grimy face. “This may seem like a strange question,” I said, “but why are the boards on those barns vertical?”

He took a couple of gulps from a gallon jug of water and replied, “They’re tobacco barns. Gotta be hollow ta hang tobacco. We build ’em on a frame—ain’t no need to waste time with a buncha studs since there won’t be no walls inside, but that means ya can’t nail the boards side to side like on a house.” Seeing that I didn’t quite grasp the concept, he went on, “It’s kind of like a big H, that’s all.” Now I understood. “Thanks a . . .” He had already picked up a wrench and gone back to work.

Understanding how the barns were built inspired yet another detour, down side roads that were often unpaved, sometimes barely driveways. Vertical boards allowed for many variations in form. Most of the barns were rectangular, but some were octagonal, some almost round. Many seemed to have been shaped to adapt to the surrounding terrain, precisely planned and executed. It seemed that the women of the region were not the only artists. The men who created those barns were equally skilled at their craft. I wondered whether those men and women had thought at all about the legacy that they had built, piece by piece, board by board.

I soon discovered that dozens of quilt trails spread throughout Kentucky and are not confined to the state or even to the South. Those quilt blocks that seemed such a personal tie to my roots were symbolic to folks in Ohio, Iowa, and New York as well. It hardly seemed possible. As for the travelers who drove the quilt trails, did they feel the same sense of belonging when in front of one of those painted squares that I did? Did they stop—just for a moment—and recall the pride of place that existed before the city or suburbia became home? I wanted to know their stories, to discover how quilts transcend culture and region and represent a larger connection.

My questions led to Donna Sue Groves in Adams County, Ohio, and the story of the American Quilt Trail began to unfold.



The road to Donna Sue began with a call to Judy Sizemore of the Kentucky Arts Council. A brief chat yielded a bit more of the story and piqued my curiosity. I had to know more. Judy went on to explain that Donna Sue Groves had created the

first quilt barn and that the story was hers to tell. She passed along Donna Sue's phone number and wished me luck.

What Donna Sue refers to as her West Virginia twang was to my ears a close cousin to my mother's Southern drawl. That voice and the warmth behind it made me feel at ease almost immediately. Our first conversation lasted over an hour—a subtle dance of my wanting to know the answers to a host of questions and her needing to know who was asking. Over the next couple of weeks, Donna Sue and I spoke about a dozen times. It's hard to say just when our ease of communication developed—how long it took until our conversations fell into a sort of rhythm as she began to anticipate my questions and I learned to be silent and allow her to fill in the spaces. I never asked the nagging question, though—the one that had instigated that first phone call. One evening as we were saying our good-byes, Donna Sue paused and said with measured emphasis, “Suzi, I'm going to trust you with my story.” And so it began.

The word *Appalachia* often carries a negative connotation, even among those whose roots are in the region. But Donna Sue describes her heritage as a gift: “I am part of those early settlers that moved into the hills and river valleys of Appalachia looking for a new life, a new beginning, and a safe haven to create a home.” Her childhood home in Crede, West Virginia, on the banks of the Elk River was such a haven. Fronted by railroad tracks and a state road, with a mountainside directly opposite, it was Donna Sue's cocoon. She says, “I had it all as a child—the magic of the ever-changing river and the enchantment of the woods.” But it was when visiting family away from her much-beloved home that Donna Sue became connected to both barns and quilts.

“Chew Mail Pouch—twenty points!” “Bank barn—ten!” Donna Sue and her brother, Michael, sat in the back of the car scouring the landscape on the way to visit their grandparents. While children in other parts of the country might be occupied with spotting license plates, cars that drove the back roads of West Virginia seldom afforded that opportunity. Maxine Groves created a unique game of counting barns to keep her children busy. Some barns were two points; others, red barns for instance, were worth more. If the barn had outdoor advertising on it, such as “See Rock City” or “RC Cola,” whoever spotted it got a bonus of ten points if able to read the slogan. The game led to discussions and questions about the barns: Were they English, Welsh, German? The various construction methods and uses of barns led to history lessons that were both educational and engaging. About the time Donna Sue entered her teens, the family began to travel to New England for vacations, and along the Pennsylvania Turnpike, the beautiful Pennsylvania Dutch barns with their hex signs appeared. Donna Sue recalls, “They had the most colorful, wonderful, geometric designs on them, and they were worth fifty points in our car game; that was pretty exciting. I looked forward to seeing those barns.” In this fashion, barns, particularly decorated barns, were imprinted on Donna Sue's mind.



The quilts of Donna Sue's childhood were much more personal, as they were direct ties to her family heritage. Here, the two of us connected, as the treasure that is a homemade quilt was sacred to us both. Quilting had been a tradition in Donna Sue's family for several generations. The "pieced" quilts made by her maternal grandmother fascinated Donna: "I remember the cloth that Grandmother Green used to make her quilts. The scraps of material were so tiny, and when she finished, I could not understand how she created something so big and beautiful. The fabric scraps were leftovers from her dresses; when I touched the quilt squares it was like touching Grandmother." When Maxine Groves took up the craft some years later, she used her mother's piecing method to create traditional patterns, which evolved into the masterpieces that brought her admiration from her daughter and recognition from so many others.

Donna Sue's voice filled with wonder when she told a story of her Grandmother Groves. During one fall visit, Donna Sue was told to select her three favorite maple leaves from the yard. Donna Sue carefully made her selection but was curious. When asked what she would do with the leaves, Donna Sue's grandmother replied, "You'll see." The question was posed on the next visit: "What are you going to do with my leaves?" Her grandmother replied, "You'll just have to wait and see." Each visit, the same question was asked, the same answer given. Several months later, her grandmother pulled out a quilt with appliquéd maple leaves in oranges and browns made just for Donna Sue. To Donna Sue, "It was magic. In it were the very outlines of the leaves that I picked up off the ground that she had used as templates." The magic of her family quilts and the fascination with barns stayed with Donna Sue throughout her life.

The Groves family moved from West Virginia to Xenia, Ohio, to seek better economic opportunity. But for Donna Sue, West Virginia was always home. After her father passed away and her mother retired, she was ready to return to West Virginia, but her mother suggested a compromise. In 1989, Donna Sue and Maxine Groves bought a thirty-acre farm in Adams County, Ohio, in the foothills of what Donna Sue calls "my beloved Appalachian Mountains." The property included a small barn, which had not been used in some time. Donna Sue was thrilled to finally have a barn of her own, but this particular barn looked nothing like those that had captured her childhood interest. The tobacco barn was much simpler and plainer than those in West Virginia or those that she remembered from her trips to New England. In fact, Donna Sue declared it "the ugliest barn I have ever seen in my life." As they stood looking at the barn, the idea clicked. Donna Sue said, "Mom, it needs some color; this needs some brightening up. I'm gonna paint you a quilt square on it sometime."

Donna Sue's focus turned to other projects, and that "sometime" would not come for several years. Beginning with the Ohio Appalachian Arts Initiative and continuing as Southern Field Representative for the Ohio Arts Council, Donna

Sue worked with nonprofits and artists to nurture community development through the arts. She describes her interaction with local artists as “a lot of handholding, cheerleading, listening, networking, offering of tools and resources, empowering them until they were able to move forward. I felt like they were little boats on the river; once they got their little boat all built and got it off the shore and into the water and floated on down the river, if I had done a real good job they didn’t even remember that I’d been around.”

But during all of the years spent encouraging others, Donna Sue never forgot about her promise to her mother.

“I told her I was gonna paint her a quilt square, and I told everybody else that I was gonna paint a quilt square.” Finally, in January 2001, two of Donna Sue’s friends encouraged her to complete the project. After a community meeting, Pete Whan with the Nature Conservancy Edge of Appalachia and Elaine Collins, the Adams County Economic Development Director, approached Donna Sue. Pete said, “Donna, your idea of painting the quilt square for your mother is such a great idea. She’s getting older and you really ought to do it; Elaine and I would like to help you.” Donna Sue was excited about the idea, but the impulse to help local artists also leapt to mind: “If we’re going to paint one, let’s paint multiple ones and create a driving tour for folks to come into the county—for them to drive this trail—in hopes that we can capture their tourism dollars.” A committee was formed, funding to begin the project was received, and a trail of twenty “quilt barns,” including the one for Maxine Groves that sparked her daughter’s idea, was begun.

The two concepts—Donna Sue’s desire to honor her mother and her enthusiasm for local arts initiatives—had emerged as one project. But creating quilt squares on the sides of barns also resonated with Donna Sue’s deep love for Appalachia and the rich heritage of the region. Donna Sue explains,

I hoped that we would be able to preserve those stories, about those that built the barns and the family farm stories and the quilts. Of equal importance are the quilts in those families and the stories that go along with them. Preserving those stories will help us to know where we came from and who we came from. We can reflect on the strength—the energy and focus and dedication and hardship—all of those things that our foremothers and forefathers did so we could be where we are today. We need to remember those stories. That’s our DNA; maybe our larger community DNA connects us all together just like a quilt.

Feeling like one of the “little boats” to which Donna Sue had referred, I set out to discover just what that quilt was made up of.

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