

Quilt and fabric show reveals centuries-old secrets

BY DANIEL SCHWAB

At the Art Gallery of Windsor Oct. 15, Nancy Trowbridge of Sew & Sew quilting shop in Essex revealed a centuries-old secret that helped many escaping slaves flee their captors in the southern U.S. and find their way to freedom on the Underground Railroad to Canada.

During her talk, Riding the Underground Railroad, at the Quilt and Fabric Art Show, Trowbridge explained how plantation slaves would often hang quilts over barn doors with

secret messages sewn into them as a guide or warning for those on the run.

She said plantation owners often considered quilt-making an acceptable pastime for slaves, "to keep their hands busy so they weren't planning an escape."

But unbeknownst to most slave owners, a secret network of information was being passed between the slaves.

Different regions had different codes, explained Trowbridge, who focused on South Carolinian practices.



Quilt artists Georgeann Welsh, Joanne Patterson, Betty Ives, Nancy Trowbridge and Martha Wiens pose in front of a replica of a slaves' quilt at the Art Gallery of Windsor Oct. 15. Speaking at the Quilt and Fabric Art Show, Trowbridge explained how the quilts contained secret messages that helped slaves escape their captors in the southern U.S. and find their way to safety in Canada.

Each quilt contained a block with the symbol or message enclosed in it.

A monkey-wrench block symbolized the gathering of tools to plan for an escape. It meant that slave would soon be collecting crusts of bread, a knife and possibly a compass to use while on the road.

A carpenter's wheel block came out when an escape was taking place. It also bore reference to Jesus and offered spiritual protection, as most slaves were Christian.

A block containing a bear's paw reminded escaping slaves to follow bear tracks. Because of favourable weather condi-

tions, May was the preferred month to attempt an escape. By that time most bears had come out of hibernation, and were using an innate ability to find the shortest, easiest route through the woods with the promise of food and water, Trowbridge said.

Other blocks represented plantations as either yellow or black squares. Yellow warned the escaping slave to keep moving while black meant it was okay to stop in for a bite to eat or a cold drink.

More ambitious blocks even contained detailed maps of the region, but were sewn in a clever way as to deceive the plantation owner, Trowbridge said.

Canada was represented in the star block. It reminded refugees to follow the North Star, often referred to by them as the "star of

Bethlehem," which was Canada, Trowbridge said.

She demonstrated the meanings of the blocks on a quilt she made herself over a 60-hour period.

She has even donated a replica slave quilt to the North Buxton National Historic Site and Museum, which documents much of the early black settlement in southwestern Ontario.

Trowbridge said she became interested in the secret messages contained in slaves' quilts when she discovered she had a personal connection to it.

While in North Buxton visiting her friend Jacqueline Tobin, an author and descendant of American slaves, Trowbridge was introduced to a young man named Benny.

Benny was thrilled to meet her, and even said he'd been looking for

Trowbridge for a long time.

She was then informed that Benny's ancestors had been adopted by a "Colonel" Trowbridge.

Since then, she has enjoyed studying the history of slave quilting and the Underground Railroad.

The art show also featured some of Trowbridge's original quilts not related to the Underground Railroad.

She was joined in the show by Sew & Sew employee Joanne Patterson and owner Georgeann Welsh, who also displayed their works.

"We're so thrilled," Welsh said of being asked by the Art Gallery of Windsor to participate in the exhibit, which is running until Oct. 22. "For artists in the area to be able to show our works is really amazing."

The show features 46

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