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Quilting: A Family Tradition

By Bobbie Smith Bryant, Jefferson County

As I've studied my ancestral past as an eighth-generation farm kid from Western Kentucky, I've come to understand a great deal more about the culture and traditions of my family. Surprisingly, quilts have a way of telling our collective stories.

In early America, the Album or Friendship pattern was a popular quilt style. It often was given to couples as a wedding gift. It gained popularity when wagonloads of pioneers migrated westward to Oregon and California in search of gold and a new life.

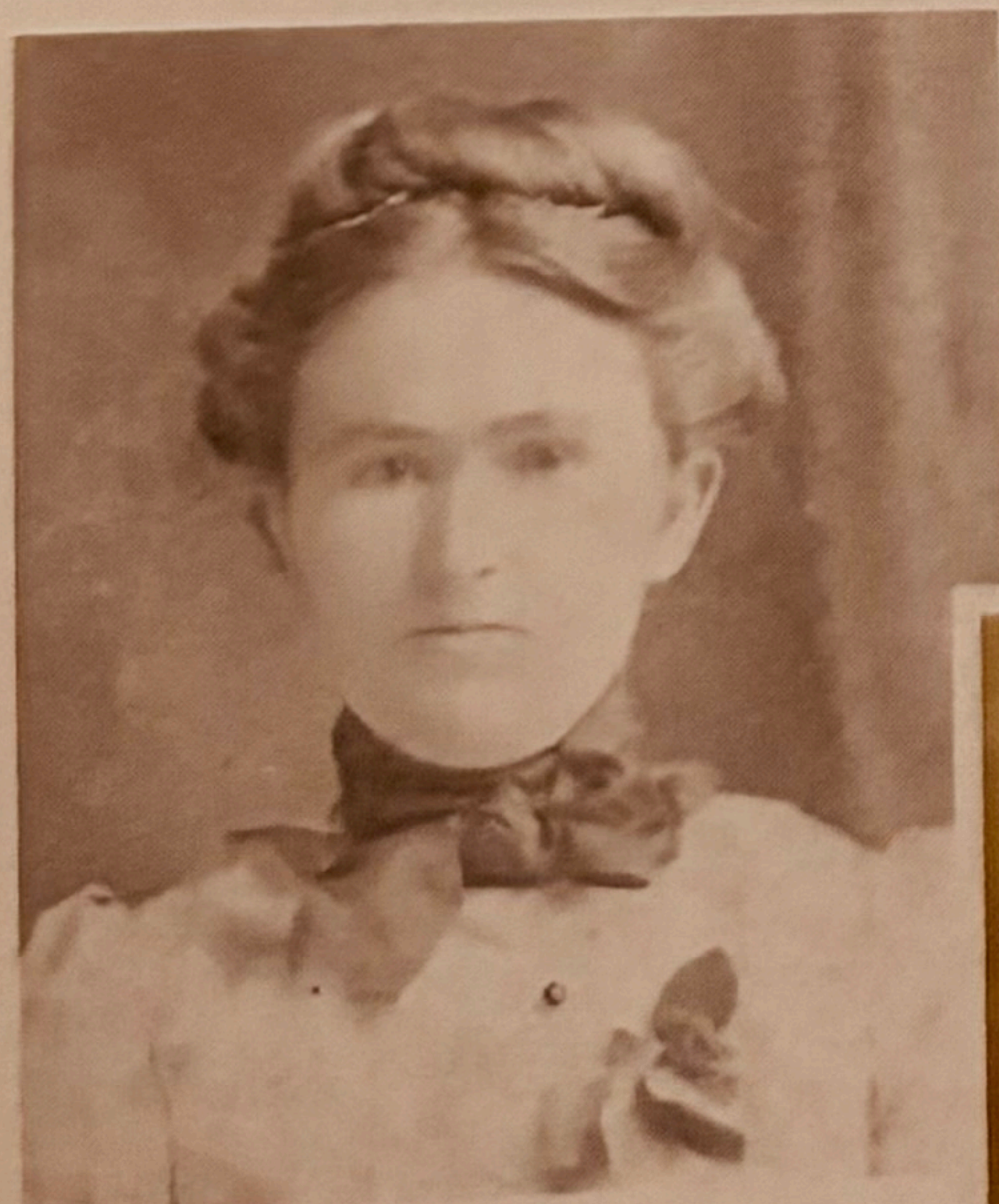
During the post-Depression years, quilters were drawn to the style once more, particularly in Western Kentucky, with the building of Kentucky Dam. During the 1940s, the federal government relocated more than 2,600 families and took over 400,000 acres for what we know today as the Land Between the Lakes.

For women of that era, quilting provided a way to express themselves. For those who had no choice but to move away from family and friends—and others whose voices were neither heard, nor heeded—quilting provided an outlet, both physically and emotionally.

For some, the act of quilting may have provided solace. From the focus of selecting a pattern and choosing multiple pieces of material in different colors, to placing them into pleasing patterns and cutting them into sharp angles or perfect circles, quilting was a diversion from the upsetting changes occurring all around.

For others, the rhythmic and repetitive stitching provided a comforting routine. Perhaps for some quilters, having their hands busy with a creative outlet may have helped them cope with the loss they felt and to deal with their new surroundings.

My family, like most in rural 20th century Kentucky, made a living off the land. The women not only worked in the field,



Above, Dovie Sutherland Brewer; right, Jim and Dovie Brewer with their children, circa 1900.



but also grew huge gardens, did all the housework, and—in their free time—quilted and sewed. My brother and I are fortunate to have the results of their handiwork—fabulous, colorful



quilts that have been passed down through generations.

The quilt in the above photo is the oldest in our family collection. It was made by Dovie (Sutherland) Brewer (1871-1946) around 1900. Dovie was my great-great-grandmother. We have wonderful photos of her, and the stories that have been passed along over the years bring her to life, even though we never knew her.

The eldest of three children, her dad, Jesse Sutherland, fought for the Confederate Army in Hardeman's 31st Cavalry Battalion during the Civil War. When he was injured, her mother, Martha Ann, drove a covered wagon to Texas and brought him back to Kentucky. He died soon after from his wounds.

Dovie had the same determined grit and spirit as her mother. At an early age, Dovie married James I. Brewer, and they started a family right away. Dovie was dedicated to her family, raising six sons and a daughter in Graves County.

As each of her sons married, Dovie insisted that the couple come to live in her home for a while, so she could teach the new wives to card, spin and weave. She felt it important that they know how to make their own wool, then create a blanket and three quilts before leaving the Brewer home to start life on their own.

When I think about the amount of time Dovie had to spend taking care of children and the house—plus helping her husband on the farm—I am in awe of her capabilities and time management skills. I'm also impressed with her creativity, shown in the layout and design of this four-patch-pattern quilt made from worn-out shirts, dresses, bibbed overalls and feed sacks.

Quilting is a legacy in which Kentuckians can take pride. Quilts have a way of telling our stories. It is an honor to reflect upon a craft that has been passed along from one generation to the next throughout our shared Kentucky and American history, connecting our past to the present.

This article is excerpted from a longer piece published in the Murray Ledger & Times, May 21, 2020.

... married Sarah Shelby, the daughter of Kentucky's first governor, Issac Shelby.