

# Airing

# OF

# the

# Quilts

## Colonial-era tradition alive and well in Smithville

By Denise Gamino

Smithville has a colorful way of showing the warmth of its community. Each November, this small town along the Colorado River opens its cedar chests and closets for a public display of more than 100 vibrant handmade quilts, many of them exquisite antiques. Smithville's annual Airing of the Quilts festival turns several blocks of Main Street into an outdoor pageant of patchwork, with the eye-catching blankets hanging from historic storefronts.

Quilts are draped, too, over the pews of downtown's First United Methodist Church, where beautiful filtered sunlight pours through stained glass windows to create a sacred fine arts gallery for the heirlooms.

The quilt festival is not confined to downtown. Throughout this historic railroad town, residents hang quilts from their porches and balconies. Front porch rockers become quilt display stands for the day. Colorado and Short streets are good spots to see single-family quilt presentations.

Airing quilts outdoors has a long tradition in America, dating to colonial times. Early settlers from Europe pulled quilts out of storage in autumn to air them out in sunshine for preparation for the cold winters. Smithville, which hosts the quilt festival this year on Nov. 12, is one of the few places that carries on the community tradition of airing quilts in fresh air to mark the season. Interest in such events, however, appears to be growing. Other Texas towns that now hold festivals to unfurl quilts include La Porte and Huntsville. They, like some other towns outside of Texas, air quilts in the spring, after winter is over, in preparation for storage.

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### Airing of the Quilts festival

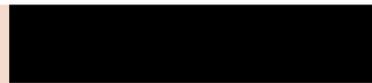
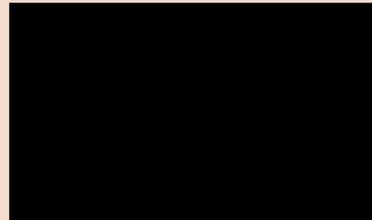
**WHAT:** Smithville Airing of the Quilts festival in conjunction with the Smithville Tour of Homes and the First United Methodist Church Quilt Festival.

**WHEN:** Nov. 12, 2016 (Methodist Church Quilt Festival is Nov. 11-12)

**WHERE:** Smithville along Main Street and in the First United Methodist Church, 400 Olive Street.

**TIME:** Airing of the Quilts Festival, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Homes Tour, noon to 4 p.m. Methodist Church Quilt Festival, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. (both days).

**COST:** Free for both quilt festivals. \$10 for tour of three historic homes, a church and an artist's studio and garden.



Jay Godwin photos

**ABOVE:** Visitors strolling down Main Street stopped to admire a butterfly quilt, one of many quilts airing in front of downtown shops in Smithville in 2015.

**FAR LEFT:** During the 2015 quilt festival, quilts like this vintage red star design aired in front of shops along Main Street in Smithville.

**LEFT:** A modern squares quilt (center) airs beside a traditional grandmother's flower garden quilt (front left) on Main Street in Smithville in 2015.

**BELOW LEFT:** Inez Green of Smithville sews only by hand to create quilts like this whirling cones quilt displayed in 2015.

**BELOW:** Pews at First United Methodist Church welcomed quilts during the citywide quilt festival in Smithville in 2015.



## Memories stronger than fragile, patchwork quilt

By Denise Gamino

**T**he last thing I expected to find on display at Smithville's Airing of the Quilts festival was a worn, antique quilt that I slept under more than 30 years ago when I lived on the East Coast.

Walking down Main Street in 2015, I was drawn to a primitive patchwork quilt with grids of 25 small squares. The green, brown and coral hues of the checkerboard design caught my eye.

As I looked closer, my own uneven hand stitching winked back. Could it really be? Suddenly, recognition set in and my memories of living with this same charming quilt came flowing back as I stood alone on that sidewalk in front of a historic 1902 bank building.

The quilt was already an antique when it was given to me in Washington, D.C., in the early 1980s. I knew nothing about the quilt's origin, but I brought it to Texas when I moved to Austin in 1984. I nearly loved it to death,



Jay Godwin photos  
Austin writer Denise Gamino, above, was stunned to find a quilt she had owned for 30 years being displayed on Main Street at Smithville's 2015 Airing of the Quilts festival.

**'As I looked closer,  
my own uneven hand  
stitching winked back.  
Could it really be?'**

trying to patch it by hand when the green fabric squares ripped and batting spilled out.

I finally pushed the torn quilt to the back of a closet. About eight years ago, I donated it

to the St. Vincent de Paul thrift store on South Congress Avenue in Austin.

Now here it was in Smithville, with a \$30 price tag from Bella's Cottage Antiques, just a block away. I headed to the store, hoping someone could explain how my old quilt ended up on public display. Michele Nelson, owner of the antiques store, wasn't surprised to learn the quilt's backstory. Every handmade quilt has a history. Nelson spotted it at the thrift store and snapped it up for her inventory.

"Do you want to buy it back?" she asked.

No, thanks. Unlike the fragile quilt, my pretty memories won't unravel.

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Public quilt displays started as a "seasonal ritual of airing," said Jim Ayres, the librarian and archivist at the Texas Quilt Museum in La Grange. "It appears that what began out of seasonal and ritualistic practical necessity in the individual family has developed into community celebrations demarcating time." (You may recognize Ayres' name. He founded the University of Texas at Austin's popular Shakespeare at Winedale program and now is a UT English professor emeritus.)

Smithville's festival began as an annual event in 2009.

"Airing of the quilts is based on an old pioneer tradition. Quilts were treasured possessions, essential for long winter nights," said Jan Rodwick of Smithville, who helped organize the first few Airing of the Quilts festivals. "After much wear and tear the ladies would 'air' their quilts in the sunshine. We could just visualize our little town covered in quilts."

The quilt festival "turned out to be a huge



One of many homes around Smithville that aired quilts on the front porch or balcony during the town's 2015 quilt festival.

success," said Rodwick, who owned an antiques shop in Smithville for 22 years. "Quilts are true works of art and our little historic district turned out to be a perfect backdrop. This little festival grows every year."

The spirit of the festival has even spread to England. In 2011, a British woman named Jules Caton attended the Smithville quilt festival and bought a bundle of quilt squares sewn by hand in the 1930s by women from Paige, 18 miles north of Smithville. Each woman

embroidered her name on a quilt square.

Caton took the quilt squares back to Yorkshire, England and enlisted a group of women to research the Texas quilters and their handiwork from the Great Depression. The English women sewed the squares into a quilt and Caton, who was assigned to research a Paige quilter named Ruby Kerner, wrote about the experience in a book called "Finding Ruby."

When a community unfurls its quilts, the stories come tumbling out. ■