

Calico Shop Offers Customers Quilting Supplies With A Touch Of Nostalgia

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COLUMBIA CROSS ROADS — From its unintentioned beginning to its unusual decor combining antiques and a loft with a broad range of cotton material, the Strawberry Patch Calico Shop smacks of the romantic.

Webster defines the romantic as "Impractical in conception or plan... marked by the imaginative or emotional appeal of what is idealized."

Jeanne Wilber is proprietor of the thriving Strawberry Patch located in the hills of Bradford County. By her own admission a romantic, she says of the shop, "It's nothing, I ever set out to do, but I love it."

That Jeanne's customers adore the shop's atmosphere is obvious.

"I come here to get a fix," sighs Marty Burns, a frequent customer. Marty was inhaling the fragrant rosepetaled potpourri ensconced in a giant ceramic bowl as she sorted through the quilting patches. Escalating the spicy aroma even further were nearby sticks of cinnamon bark piled like logs and tied together with a red ribbon.

Customers not only appreciate the fact that they may choose fabric from 3,000 bolts of material but that upon entering the shop they are treated to the nostalgic sights, smells, and sounds of yesteryear. It is a toss-up whether they first hear the tinkling of old bells on the door or are assaulted by the spicy scent of the potpourri wafting down from the loft above.

Decorated with wreaths of various materials, the entryway contains an assortment of old cupboards holding handmade items for sale. At the bottom of the staircase ascending to the loft is a scene typical of the shop. A small lighted lamp and several artifacts occupy an old stand beneath a colorful painting of a woman handsewing a quilt. With its artful blend of antiques, quilts and sale goods, the mood of the shop is definitely that of country nostalgia.

It was while Jeanne's husband, Gene, was a POW in Vietnam that Jeanne says she became interested in quilting. Gene, who retired from the air force in 1973, spend his last five years of duty in a Vietnam POW camp. Jeanne, who possesses a degree in music and loves to

paint, said while Gene was away she "lost her inspiration for painting" and became intrigued with quilting.

The Wilbers had bought a rambling country home located in the hills of Bradford County for retirement purposes in 1965. But it was while Gene was held prisoner that Jeanne and their four children moved into their present house.

Jeanne says her fascination with quilting was piqued by, "The nostalgia of studying an antique quilt and wondering what the woman was like who made the quilt."

Further, she discovered that quilts showed the different personalities of the women who made them. "You could tell by the colors used, the rhythm of stitches. You could tell if they were strictly for utilitarian purposes or for more decorative ones," she added.

A prim and precise woman, Jeanne observes, might choose soft pinks and greens and make a quilt of appliqued roses using precise small stitches. Whereas another woman would select colors of browns with bright orange or bold black and red. The quilts with the big stitches, Jeanne says, were usually sewn by very young girls or by older women with failing eyesight. At that time girls of seven or eight were already learning to quilt, Jeanne reports.

In 1968, when Jeanne began her quilting quest, it was very difficult to find material about quilting. It wasn't until 1976, the year of the bicentennial, that there was a resurgence of quilting in the country. So Jeanne took books out of the library and talked with older people who quilted and began to quilt herself.

Her quilting proceeded at a slow pace during this period for she spent time speaking on behalf of the POWs. According to friends, she never gave up hope that Gene would return alive. It was her faith, Jeanne says, that sustained her during this time.

It wasn't until 1981 that events leading to the opening of The Strawberry Patch Calico Shop began. At that time Jeanne's daughter, Sue, and daughter-in-law, who were both college students, suggested to Jeanne and Gene that they would like summer jobs at home making patchwork pillows to order. The Wilbers

staked the girls to 15 bolts of fabric for their venture and Jeanne's son, Mark, advertised their wares in a national magazine.

By the end of summer, Jeanne reports, the girls had acquired employment elsewhere and Jeanne was fulfilling their orders for pillows. It has become painfully obvious by this time that the girls had miscalculated the time needed to make a pillow and the profit margin on each one was nil. Soon the business was terminated.

But as she made the pillows, Jeanne says, she fantasized about the women she was making the pillows for. "It would be a lot more fun to just sell fabric off the bolt and get to know the women I'm selling to," she thought.

At this time Jeanne still had what remained of the 15 bolts of material, but not for long. Shortly, Mark put an advertisement in a local paper saying Jeanne would be open for business the following week — and then informed her of what he had done. Thus, the Strawberry Patch Calico Shop was born.

By the end of the month Jeanne had increased her stock to 45 bolts of material. Today, in addition to 3,000 bolts of material, her shop offers a wide assortment of quilting supplies. During the past five years the Wilbers built an addition to their home which included a loft and a room below for classroom use to house their growing enterprise. Currently they have under construction a good sized "carriage shed" across the



Jeanne dips some potpourri from a large ceramic bowl for a customer. The fragrant odor greets guests as soon as the shop door opens.

road from their home which will be used for classrooms and storage.

Jeanne likes people. A footnote on a pamphlet describing the shop lists it as, "The Quilt Shop With Love." Cataloguing why she en-

joys running the shop, Jeanne exclaims, "Oh the rewards are the people, the new acquaintances, the many friends I've made through the business — teaching women to (Turn to Page B4)



The Strawberry Patch Calico Shop is housed in part of the Wilber's sprawling country home in Columbia Cross Roads.



Jeanne and Sue wait on Marty Burns, one of the shop's best customers.



Jeanne and her daughter, Sue Ethimiou, sit by the fireplace in Jeanne's colonial kitchen. The kitchen is under the loft where the 'material' shop is located.

Homestead Notes