

A Stitch in Time

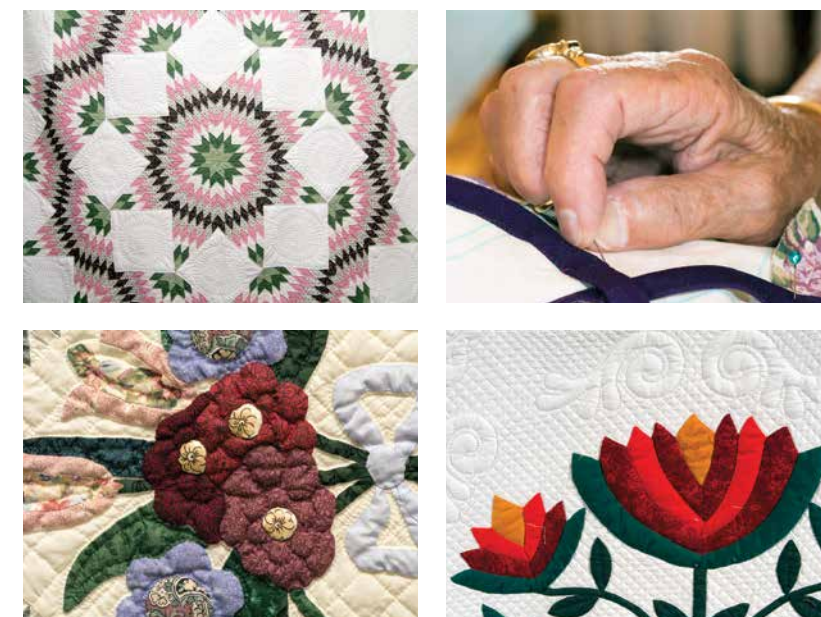
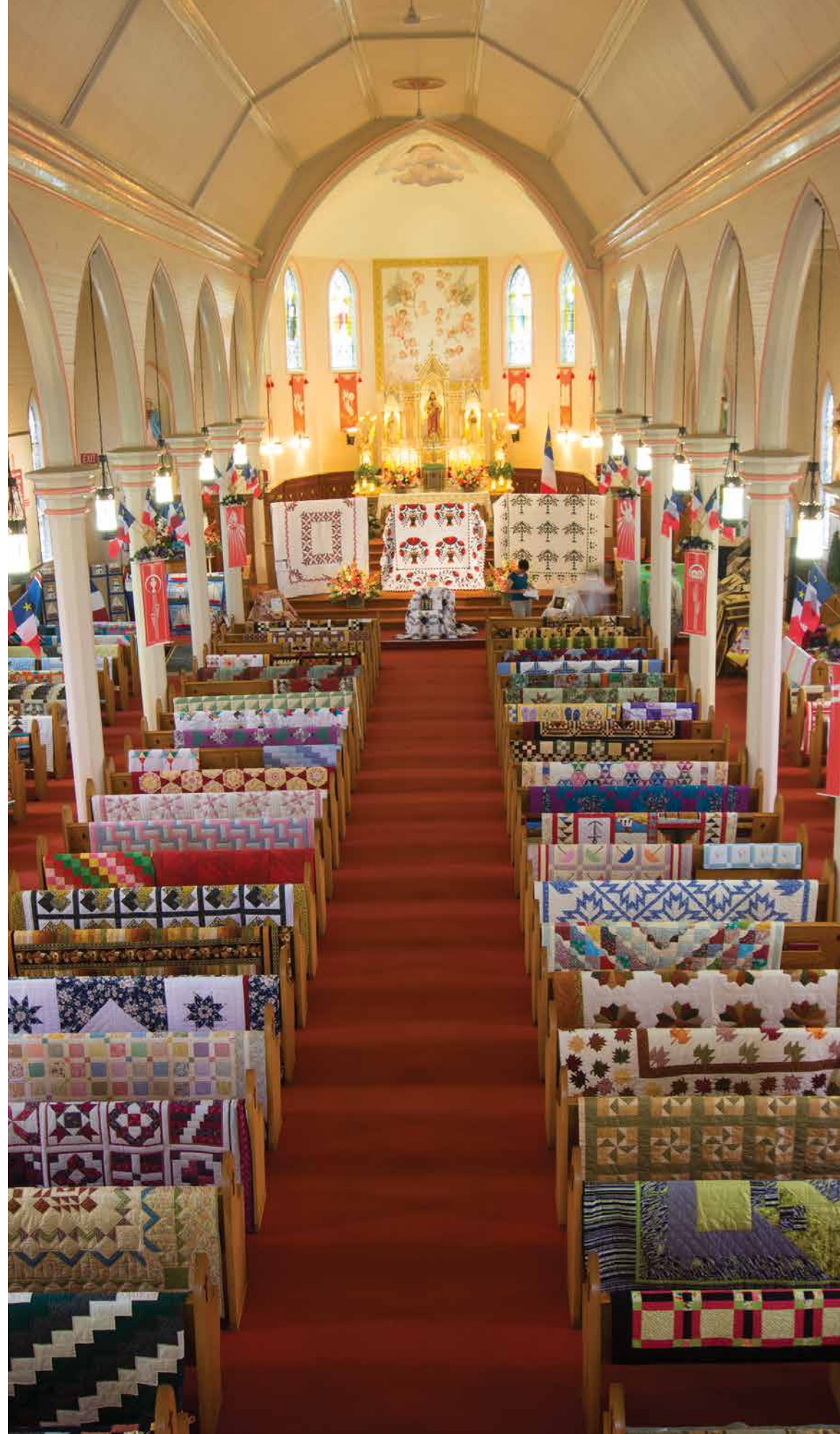
The curious compulsion of
quilt-making in Clare, NS

by Marjorie Simmins
photography: Scott Leslie

When Joan Tufts first thought about forming a quilting group, she imagined a few friends and neighbours gathered around her kitchen table, in her home village of Grosses Coques, on the southwest coast of Nova Scotia. She placed an advertisement on the local television station, Télé-Clare, asking community members to join her for some quilting. “I said to my husband, ‘I’ll be pleased if at least four people answer my invitation,’” says Joan who simply wanted company while she stitched. Instead, on January 26, 2011, 27 women met at the Little Brook Fire Hall and registered to form La Guilde Acadienne de Clare. “We now have a cap of 100 members,” says Joan—“and a waiting list.”

If you think that quilt making might be a dying pioneer art in Atlantic Canada, check out the schedules at your local church hall or community centre. Chances are, you’ll see a quilting guild meeting listed. Young or mature, novice or expert, solo or in groups, people are stitching up fabric storms, and nowhere is this more obvious than in the francophone District of Clare, which occupies the western half of Nova Scotia’s Digby County.

Acadians have long been enthusiastic quilters. The history of quilt making, however, began long before Acadians and other Europeans came to North America. Nations around the world used padded fabrics for clothing, bedding, even armour. The word quilt, of Latin origins, meant “stuffed sack.” It is now used both as a noun, meaning a three-layer stitched bed covering, and as a verb, meaning the process of stitching through three layers to hold them together. A cloth sandwich of sorts, the quilt has a decorated top, a filler middle and a back. While there are countless designs and manifestations of quilts, there are three main types: plain or whole-cloth; appliqué (one piece of material sewn over another, to make a design); and pieced, or patchwork. They can be hand-stitched or



Left: The annual quilt show at Église Sacré-Coeur in Saulnierville, NS, is part of the Festival Acadien de Clare. One attendee this year was Kathy Broussard, from Louisiana. “I love it here, she says. I never have to spell my last name.” Above: detail of the intricate handwork.

produced using a sewing machine.

“Hand quilting is predominantly the best practice in this area,” says Joan. “A machine-quilted quilt does not have that personal touch our Acadian ancestors so proudly displayed.” Clare quilters also tend to favour the more traditional patterns, she says. Among these are the deliciously named Hearts and Gizzards, Dresden Plate, Log Cabin, Double Wedding Ring and Drunkard’s Path.

The guild meets every Wednesday evening and one Saturday a month, at the church hall of Église Sacré-Coeur in Saulnierville. Members work on individual projects, quilts for charities, and assist young or new quilters.

“Passing down the art of quilting is a top priority for the guild.” Accordingly, the guild has piloted a program in one of the local elementary schools called Les P’tites Piqueuses de L’Avenir (little quilters of the future). They also offer programs for juniors via the Clare Recreation Department.

Once a year, in conjunction with the Festival Acadien de Clare, the Saulnierville Parish Project Committee hosts a spectacular quilt show and sale at the church. More than 200 quilts, coming from Digby to Yarmouth, are draped over the back of the pews, as shown left, and hung over the edge of the choir loft. Visitors mostly come from across Canada, but also from Europe and the US. Approximately 900 attended this year’s show, including Kathy Broussard, of Cajun heritage, from Louisiana.

“I bought a hand-stitched baby quilt for my niece who just got married,” she said happily. “I’ll just put it away until it’s needed.” She smiles: “I love it here. I never have to spell my last name.”

Lost in quiet thought at home

Not all quilters join a guild—some opt to work at home. Frances Saulnier has lived in St. Benoni, near Meteghan River, since she



Frances Saulnier used to quilt to keep her family warm. "With six kids, you needed a lot of quilts," she says. Now, she's made a keepsake quilt for each of her adult children. Shown here are Wedgewood Tulips, A Ray of Light, and an original design for one son who is an amateur luthier and musician.



got married in 1951. She and her late husband, Henry, raised six children—all of whom slept under the quilts she made. "With six kids, you needed a lot of quilts! It was necessary to make them," she says. "They weren't luxury items." The Nova Scotian winters required more than one per bed, says Frances, who first learned to quilt from her grandmother, and later made them with her mother-in-law.

The intense, patchwork quilt-making period in her life was "pre-Frenchys," Frances explains, so fabric was obtained through re-purposing everyday clothes and patching them together. (Frenchys is a chain of used clothing stores, founded in 1972.) Cotton dresses worked well, as did men's shirttails—"Those never wear out!" she laughs. Sometimes people gave her fabric.

As the years passed and the children grew up, Frances began to choose more demanding projects. She started buying fabric from stores—though remained true to her frugal roots, keeping material scraps.

In 1987 she decided to make a forever-quilt for each of her children, now adults. She had already made a quilt for her daughter Denise in the traditional Bear's Paw pattern. "I did Simon's next," she says. "It was called A Ray of Light."

For Charles, an amateur luthier and musician, Frances created an original design that featured a fiddle, bow and an open book of sheet music at the centre; tiny music notes were stitched onto the staff with embroidery floss.

Next came daughter Rose's quilt, Broken Star; stars within stars were done in soft rose, along with sage green, black and white. Michelle's quilt, Wedgewood Tulips, was white with smoky-blue tulips at the centre and edges.

For Gilles, a lobsterman at the time, Frances chose a variation of Storm at Sea. To the crisp red, white, blue and brown quilt

she added a marine compass. "I call it the Saint Mary's Bay Mariner," she says, referring to the broad expanse of water that runs along the coast into the Gulf of Maine.

Six heirloom quilts all intricately quilted, six grateful children—and years and years of work. Frances could take a break now.

In fact, she was just getting started. She set herself even tougher quilting challenges in the years following. She did elaborate appliqué and learned to ruche, a process that involves gathering or pleating material, commonly used to create flowers. She worked on her latest quilt, Orchid Wreath, on and off for three years. She does not sell her quilts—they are done for the happiness they bring to her and her family.

She loves the process, sometimes getting lost in thought. "I find it very relaxing. You don't hear a television or radio, and I am here by myself—with my quilts and my thoughts."

When you're quilting you remember the things you enjoyed when you were young. Sometimes I quilt right up to meal-times." Some days housework comes before her quilting, but whenever she sits down again, fabric in her lap, needle poised, "My hands know what to do."

Frances obviously enjoys working solo on her big projects, but she also cherishes making quilts with her family. Several years ago they decided to make a baby quilt for Gilles' son Noah, featuring portraits of the six family cats. Denise, Rose, Michelle and Simon each appliquéd a cat block, while Frances did the remaining two, and her sister quilted it.

A Pinwheel quilt followed, which Frances gave to Noah, now six, for his bed. "Let him use it!" says Frances. "Then put it away when it's worn. He can look at later on and say, 'Grandma gave me this quilt.'" She smiles.

"He'll remember."



Joan Tufts, who advertised on a local TV station to get quilters around her kitchen table in 2011; the response led to La Guilde Acadienne de Clare being formed. Above right: her granddaughters (and guild members) Laurène and Ariane Comeau, displaying their creative flair.

Quilting, making jokes, spending time together

For sisters Nicole Thimot Gennette, from Little Brook, and Carmen Thimot Maillet, from Mavillette, it's hard to say which they love best: quilting, making jokes or spending time together. Fortunately, they can do all three when they attend the guild meetings in Saulnierville.

"I don't like old-fashioned quilts," says Nicole, laughing.

"But we do work by hand," says Carmen, smiling. "And I love to put embroidery in my quilts."

"Nicole's quilts are like her personality—colourful and hippy-dippy!"

"I do love material—we find it at Frenchys, mostly."

The sisters learned to sew, knit and crochet from their mother, Lorraine Thimot. Now all of them, including a third sister Janice, enjoy quilting. "The guild meetings are good for Mum to get out of the house and do something fun," says Carmen. "We all sit at the same table—it's a nice family get-together." With quilting, there is room for all tastes and choices, the sisters say.

While those who quilt by hand are highly respected for



of hand-stitching, practised by her grand-mère.

"Sometimes I make the quilt top and my grandmother does the quilting. It's a tradition and heritage," she says.

Love of family and love of fabric

With the emotional and tactile satisfaction derived from love of family and love of fabric—deep at the heart of quilting—it's small wonder the middle and mature generations feel the need to pass down their wisdom.

Joan Tufts' granddaughters Ariane and Laurène Comeau are guild members—Ariane, at 10, is the youngest member.

"More young girls are coming in now," she says smiling.

Laurène joined the guild when she was 11 and is now 13. In a generational reverse of Frances Saulnier's decision to create quilts for each of her grown children and young grandson, Laurène has just completed an appliqué quilt with green polka-dots for her mother.

Ariane, for her part, made a colourful quilt decorated with appliquéd flip flops. Both quilts express the girls' sense of fun and good cheer.

"It's nice to sit down and sew and talk at the meetings," says Laurène. "To see everyone once a week."

"The best part about quilting is spending time with my grandmother," says Ariane. "Yes, me too," says Laurène.

"It's so important to keep the art alive and kicking," says Simone Saulnier, another member of the guild (no relation to Frances Saulnier). Simone works in the fabric department of Clarence's, a local general and grocery store. "I've quilted for 30 years but I was inspired anew when I joined the guild. We learn from each other—and sometimes the younger ones teach us."

Joan Tufts agrees. "The experienced juniors will be teaching the new people," she says. "We all feel comfortable sharing the art of quilting."

One day not so long from now, Joan's granddaughters Laurène and Ariane will likely say the same thing—and quilt with their grandchildren, at their local guild's meeting hall. Every stitch learned, every hour shared, builds memories for the future. Forever-quilts, all of them.

They'll remember.