



Mearle Smith Byles
Quilter

Mearle Smith Byles had been quilting since she was about twelve years old. She had come a long way since she began quilting with her mother and other women in Robeline. In 1993, she was among the first women to be inducted in the Louisiana Folklife Center Hall of Master Folk Artists. The first pattern Byles remembered was the Nine Patch, a pattern which includes blocks made of nine two-inch squares of scrap cloth. While she was growing up, the most popular pattern that was used to connect the three parts of the quilt—the quilt top, batting, and lining—was the shell pattern made up of half circles placed about one inch apart. Byles liked both traditional and contemporary patterns: traditional Trip Around the World, Log Cabin, Sun Bonnet Sue, and Double Wedding Ring. Byles also liked using appliqued patterns that allow quilters to tell a story by attaching figures to quilt tops. She described the differences between traditional and contemporary quilting saying, "First, there's the batting. When I was a girl, I spent a lot of time carding batts from scrap cotton which made quilts uneven and heavy."

The use of floor frames rather than ceiling frames is another difference between traditional and contemporary quilting: "You don't see quilts hanging from the ceiling anymore. For example, I use floor frames which hold about forty-five inches of quilt rather than the regular eighty-one inches in the ceiling frame," explained Byles. One of the reasons why Byles used floor frames is because it's easier for her to sew good uniform stitches. She commented, "I like my stitches short, straight, and uniform, and so I use floor frames. It's just the way I like to do it. I knew a ninety-one-year-old lady who could sew just as straight as you please by just putting the quilt on her lap. But I can't do that."

Byles enjoyed incorporating more modern techniques with traditional modes of quilting but saw the pluses and minuses of both approaches to quilting, the quilting bee being one example. "I really like to associate with the other women and catch up on what's happening in the community," she explained, "but there's another side to it. Every woman has her own quilting style, and people who pay \$500 for a quilt usually want it to be the work of one person and for the quilting to be uniform. So, in recent years I've chosen to do a lot of my quilting by myself."

When Byles first retired from her work as a hospital staff member, she amused herself with books and television but quickly returned to her first love. "There are lots of good movies and books out there, and I'll continue to watch TV and read, but it's the quilting and other types of sewing that satisfy me. That's what I'll keep on doing as long as I can," she explained. In recent years, she had been recognized not only for her quilting, but for her spinning, weaving, crocheting, tatting, and bobbin lace as well. She demonstrated her talents at area wide festivals and at the Pioneer Heritage Center at Louisiana State University in Shreveport. Her quilts sold for upwards of \$400. Ms. Byles died February 21, 2006.

Updated November 30, 2016 by Natchitoches-NSU Louisiana Folklife Center Staff