

OPINION

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COMMENTARY

Hanks: Patching together warm family memories

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We live in a culture of abundance, a society drowning in stuff. Off-site storage units are a growth industry, while houses keep getting bigger to contain the avalanche of possessions. Magazines such as *Real Simple* and books like Karen Kingston's "Clear Your Clutter with Feng Shui" attempt to deliver us from our mess. Hopelessly overwhelmed folks can even hire a professional organizer.

But it wasn't always that way. For much of our history, resources were scarce and people had to make do with what they had. Much as my family did.

My paternal grandmother, Lester "Hazel" Byley, was born in deep East Texas in 1913. She quickly acquired the era's vital domestic skills. She could wring a chicken's neck with a quick arm twirl, then expertly fry up the unlucky clucker. Every year she "put up," aka canned, enough vegetables, fruits and preserves to stock a small store. But what she really did was quilt. Perhaps obsessively. Especially after her wedding ring pattern quilt won her a trip from San Augustine to A&M at College Station in 1929 for a 4-H meeting. Back then, that was a huge trip for a young gal.

When my parents fled Houston last year ahead of Hurricane Rita, the only thing I asked them to pack was Granny's quilts. That's no small request. They would've taken up most of the Suburban.

So, it's not surprising that I was thinking of Granny while visiting "Miss Ima's Quilts" at the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum.

The exhibition displays 25 quilts collected by Texas philanthropist Miss Ima Hogg (1882-1975). Daughter of Texas Gov. Jim Hogg, Miss Ima acquired quilts from Colonial America to the 20th century.

While not the showiest of Miss Ima's Quilts, the "Basket Quilt" captured my attention. Once owned by Miss Ima's younger brother, Tom Hogg, it features red and white baskets on a yellow background. It's dated between 1900 and 1940. Colorwise, picture diced onions and tomatoes neatly arranged on a bowl of golden Chili Con Queso. This color combination isn't unusual.

"Plain yellow cottons and yellow ground calicoes were common accents in red and green quilts as early as the mid-1800s," said Kate Adams, guest curator for "Miss Ima's Quilts."

The basket quilt caught my eye because it's similar to the "red star on yellow background" quilt my granny reportedly made for the quilt competition at the 1936 Texas Centennial State Fair.

Like many folks, my granny had two styles of quilting, showpiece and recycling. She recycled the worn-out clothing of her three sons — even shirts she had originally made from feed sacks — producing patchworks of the soft, worn fabrics. Later, when feed sacks were thin on the ground in the 1960s and '70s, she made quilts from the era's popular polyesters. These are the ones I helped her with, as her eyesight was fading from diabetic complications. Since I can't sew, my help consisted of "hold this" and "thread the needle." My grandmother continued quilting until her death in 1988.

Granny's polyester block quilts are impossibly distant from the high-falutin' lifestyle of some of Miss Ima's quilts. For example, the elaborate silk, satin and velvet "crazy quilts" were never meant to be used or washed, only admired.

Yet, everything from the velvet luxuries in Miss Ima's collection to Granny's polyester block creations are part of the American folklore tradition.

These days, while enough people are quilting to keep several Central Texas quilting supply shops in business, many people are now buying commercially made quilts. These imported quilts are among the avalanche of objects that are forcing us into renting storage space, buying larger homes and skewing the balance of trade toward foreign imports.

Perhaps quilting is the solution to some of these ills. It was for us.

Our attic once held a box of tattered, transparent T-shirts that my husband and I had loved to death in college.

Luckily, a friend's momma transformed our fire-hazard into a fabulous T-shirt quilt. Our bed now reads: "Austin-Irkutsk Texas-Soviet Student Exchange" and MC Hammer's "Too Legit [To Quit]. Local Crew. 1992 World Tour."

A by-product of the quilt is that our getting divorced is now damned unlikely. With a nod to the 1960s Buck Owens breakup tune, "We Split the Blanket," literally splitting our handmade blanket would be impossible.

Our T-shirt quilt is clutter reducing, recycling, divorce-inhibiting, balance-of-trade correcting and warm. My granny would be proud. She'd be prouder if I'd made it myself, but we can't all have her gift.

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