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KT This is Kim Taylor interviewing Helen Boyd in her home just outside of Brockton, Montana July 14, 1992. To start with I'd like a little bit of background information about you, Helen. Where you were born and raised.

HB I was born in Brockton raised here in Brockton. Lived here all my life.

KT And you're married?

HB Married and three kids. The oldest boy is in the navy. The second boy is married. And my daughter, she'll be going off to Bozeman this fall. She graduated in '92.

KT Is there any particular religious affiliation?

HB Catholic.

KT When did you begin quilting?

HB When I was about twenty-one years old. Yeah, about twenty-one.

KT Why did you start?

HB I've always seen my mother and my grandmother doing it. They did a lot of it. And I just sort of picked up on it. And then now my daughter is doing it. She's been doing it since she was about fourteen. She's eighteen now. You just kind of pick up on it, you know as your going. I never taught her. She just picked up from her grandmother too. But her, she quilts without a thimble, whereas I have to use it. Your fingers get pretty tough with blankets.

KT Did anyone formally teach you how to do it?

HB No. You just kind of pick up on it. I think it's harder when somebody tries to teach you. It's hard to pick up on. You know, cut this way, you cut this way. It's better if you just do it yourself. Instead of having someone teach you.

KT When you quilt, do you quilt by yourself? Or do you ever have someone help you?

HB She usually helps me.

KT Your daughter?

HB She usually helps me.
KT With the cutting and piecing?

HB No, she doesn't know how to do that yet. Just to quilt it and putting it up. Stretching it all out on a frame. There's a lot of work to it.

KT What kinds of materials do you prefer to work with?

HB I don't really have any special kind. I work with all of them... satin, taffeta, polyester, cotton. The satin is really slippery though.

KT So that's hard to work with?

HB Yeah. That satin is hard to work with, but not all that bad.

KT Sure makes a pretty quilt. Do you use just the solid colored material or do you use calicos?

HB I use prints. I use prints. In fact, I like those better than I do those plain stuff. I like plain, print, plain, print... you know, into the star quilt. You try to match, like if you have a pink print, you try to put either a bright pink or a pale pink in there. You just try to match them. Same with solids. You put a dark blue with a light blue, a dark red with a lighter red. Purple with lavendar. That's just the way I do it. I don't know how other people do it.

KT How do you pick your colors?

HB I don't know. You just try to get two different shades. Like I said, the dark and the light, the dark and the light.

KT So do you start with a color in mind and then match it up?

HB You sit there and just try to match them up. I always have to sit there for a moment about five minutes to decide what colors I want in there. If I don't like it I just take it back out and put a different color in. I don't know, it just all comes to my mind. But then some people have their own colors too. Some of them really like bright colors, real bright colors. I know the lady that I make quilts for from Yakima, Washington, she likes a bright, bright star, darker in the center. That's how she likes hers. She likes them bright. Then you get some people that like the dark star filled in with light. It all depends on the person. You know, some of these people come up with the weirdest colors. I did one for a lady and she had sort of a maroon calico print and she wanted a maroon solid and it was just those two colors that she wanted the quilt.

KT That sounds pretty dark.

HB It was. But that was her choice. She had the matwerial so I
just went ahead and did it. She liked it.

KT What did she have for a filler?

HB I think it was white. She was a nurse at the hospital, and she liked that. Like I said, everybody's got their own colors. Probably something I like, you won't like. When they order, I just have them pick their own colors. I did one for a lady, king-size with matching pillow cases. She wanted hers fall colors filled in with ivory. Now that was pretty. That was satin so that was a lot of work.

KT When you're making the satin ones you're dealing with solid colors, right?

HB Yeah, because there is no print is satin or taffeta that I know of. I've never seen a print in those. And I've been a lot of places looking at material and I've never seen a print.

KT So where do you get your materials?

HB Usually I get it in Poplar. The only place that you can find taffeta now is in Poplar. It's almost four dollars a yard. And then in Williston, they got a lot of colors there at Walmart. And they got a lot of pretty prints there. They got a big selection of colors there, at Walmart. And then I use to go to Plentywood and get satin because they have a lot of satin up there. Whenever I go somewhere, I pick it up.

KT You don't necessarily make a special trip just for fabric?

HB No. Just unless somebody orders and they pick out the colors. Then you have to go.

KT How often do you get an order?

HB Like I got all these.... Oh, I don't know. I'm busy all year round. All year round. I had a lot of orders for graduation, and then they have the wakes and the funerals. The Indian people give all this stuff away. Like now, I have an order right now to do a red, white and blue one because a man passed away and he was in the service so they want to cover his casket with a red white and blue star quilt. The color of the military.

KT How much notice would you have?

HB They just came and told me last night so I'm debating on whether I'm going to do this or not.

KT Would you have three or four days to put it together?

HB Let's see, like right now, I don't know. They just came last night.
KT Because you have these other projects?

HB Yeah. I'm always busy. And then we do, maybe Sybil told you about that, where we do the quilts to give away for our kids to during basketball tournament. She must have told you that. Well, I use to do three, all three of my kids at one time.

KT Your daughter was a cheerleader?

HB No, she was a manager. And after manager she went in to the basketball, girls basketball. About six a year we use to give away. Sometimes maybe nine because if they went to divisional, well she was the manager and I had the two boys in there. So see, that was nine to ten quilts I would give away.

KT Would you ever get request from other people to make quilts for their son or daughter too?

HB Yeah. I get a lot of those. People that don't sew usually come.

KT So you've kind of built a reputation as a star quilter within the area? People know where to get a quilt when they need it?

HB Yeah, and I don't charge that much either because I don't work and I enjoy sewing so then I can stay home. I think that's the reason that a lot of people come. Because I know that things are expensive now a day's. I don't like charging them that much either.

KT But you charge enough to cover your materials and make a little bit?

HB Yeah.

KT What does the star motif mean to you? Why do you think it's a star motif? The star quilt... it could have been it seems like any pattern but it's the star motif that's so important in this area?

HB I think it's just a sign of being Indian. Because it's very seldom you see a white person do a star quilt. It's always the Indian people. Or even different reservations, I've never seen it. I got a cousin that lives down in Wyoming in and star quilts are very seldom down there. And up in Canada, my friend is from Canada and you very seldom see. Here it's so common. I don't know why but it's just so common here on this reservation.

KT I think that it's a really strong symbol.

HB I think it's just because we're Indian that we do, I suppose.

KT There's some kind of identification with the star?

HB Yeah, because I think everybody just about grew up with it.
Like if you like somebody too, you'd probably give them a quilt or a pillow. It's just our way, I suppose. We just give, give, give, give.

KT What distinguishes a good quilt from a bad quilt?

HB The way they're made, I guess. Like oyur little diamonds, how they match. Like this. Some of them have like an inch off, one's up here and one's up there. How they're quilted. How wide are the quilting and stuff like that. And how small the quilting is.

KT In this area, it's still pretty much hand quilting, right?

HB Yeah, but there's some guy from North Dakota that he does on machine. I don't like it because I've seen it. My friend's got one like that. And then on the back it's like a boughten. I don't believe in cutting boards either. A lot of people that order, like the white people that order from me ask me "why don't you use a cutting board"? So I told them, "I don't feel like using one because it's not the Indian way".

KT So what do you use?

HB I use scissors, make my own pattern. Just cut each time diamond myself.

KT You're not using a template or a stencil?

HB No. You just make your own pattern.

KT How do you mark for the quilting, the stitching?

HB Chalk.

KT You mark it freehand?

HB Yeah. My mother and my grandmother, they just marked one outside and they went just perfectly straight without marking them. Me, I use a chalk.

KT You use the same quilting pattern that they used?

HB Yeah, but there are all kinds. You can get into, for my grandson I did a baby quilt for him, taffeta. I put hearts in it and went around every each, individual diamond so that when you flipped it over the design was on the back. From the stitching. It's time consuming but it just the way we think. I did one with hearts and I gave that one to a coach in Richee, when sis was in a basketball team. There's all kind of stitching that you can do. I use to get this pencil that works off, that diappears. Eventually it comes out.

KT I noticed that on the pillow tops you had different stars. They weren't all the same. On your quilts, do you do different star
designs?

HB Yeah, there's a lot of designs. There's a tulip, they call it a tulip. You've must have seen one.

KT I've seen it in the corners. The star with the little tulip design in the corners.

HB Yeah. And there's the broken star where there is three, three like this.

KT And you've done all of these?

HB Yeah. I like them better with corners though. The whole star and then the corners.

KT It kind of ties the colors.

HB For the corners you try to use the colors that are, you know. You picked three colors________.

KT What do you do for the boundaries, the borders?

HB There's either a bias tape you can use or most people, what they use is a print for the backing and then they just fold it over. I know a lot of people like there's folded over. Then it all matches up.

KT Do you usually use a printed fabric for your backing?

HB Sometimes. Then sometimes some people want.... it all depends on the person, I can't really say. All of the years I've sewn, I don't own a quilt.

KT They've all said that to me.... all the quilters.

HB I don't own a quilt. It all depends on what they wanted. Some want solid some people want the sheet blanket, a flannel sheet blanket instead of batting they put a flannel sheet blanket in there, plus their liner because after so many washings the batting, after just a couple of years, gathers where the sheet doesn't gather. It all depends on the person. If I was to make one for myself I really don't know what I would make it out of anyway. It's funny though, why we don't own a quilt with all the sewing that we do. I can't say why either. I don't know. And know my mother and my grandmother didn't own a quilt.

KT Maybe it's in the idea that you make it to give away.

HB I think so, yeah. Like these little potholders up here, my mom, my mother made these before she passed away. She used to make those. I don't have the patience to sit there and do those small things.
KT Those are tiny little triangles.

HB She did the centers all by hand. But see, even that has got the star design, small as it is. There's quilts like that. That's what you call a six-point quilt. That's only six points. Then there's the eight-pointed quilts. The six-point quilts are different. They're shaped just like that. They're square but there's a different way you have to fill those in too.

KT More like an outline of a star, and the eight-pointed star starts from the center and goes out. Within your family, what are some of the occasions where you might make and present a star quilt? You mentioned your son going into the service....

HB Yeah, when he was in Desert Storm he was there from the very beginning to the very end. He left in August and he didn't get back into the States until March 28. All the time he was there I did quilts and was putting them away so that when he came back we had a big dance and a big give-away for him. That's where all the quilts went. Then another one would be, if you belong on a pow-wow committee, you're an officer on a pow-wow committee, you'd give away there. Wharever something, like a wake or we usually give away there.

KT How about the birth of a baby? You said something about your grandson.

HB No, not really. Him, I just made him a quilt for himself, but I haven't heard of anybody. Oh, I suppose they could, I don't know.

KT You mean in terms of a give-away. But you might make a quilt and give it to him as a gift, right?

HB Yep. Oh, and then, if your child is getting a Indian name you'd give-away there too. That's a part of our culture too.

KT Is that when they are around five?

HB I've seen them give them to them when they're babies.

KT Oh, really. So they have a give-away for the naming, right?

HB Yeah. Naming ceremony, they have a give-away there. That's the only time I've ever done it. Give-aways, naming and one of your kids, you give away for them.

KT How does your son have that quilt on his bed?

HB I made it for him because he was in the service.

KT So that was a gift to him?

HB Yeah. For being in the service, I made it to put on his bed.
KT would you make a quilt as a wedding gift or a graduation gift or anything like that?

HB Not unless it's an order from somebody else.

KT I'm just trying to get a sense of like the predominant culture, birthday presents and things like that. I'm just trying to get a sense of how a quilt is used.

HB Some people do, but I think, urn, like a lot of them do too like, I know from Lambert, this lady came up from Lambert. Her daughter was graduating so she ordered a quilt from me, because her daughter always wanted a quilt all the years that she was in school. So she finally, you know, I think she gave it to her for graduation. They live across the river.

KT That would be kind of an individual thing? How are the quilts used when someone has a quilt? They don't just put them on the bed? They do other things with them?

HB We got some friends up in Froid here that we gave them a quilt too and they've got it hanging on the wall.

KT So it's art, a piece of art on the wall?

HB And then a lot of people too, what they do too also is when a lot of the white people when they order a baby blanket, they'll order a white or yellow, pale yellow baby quilt, satin baby quilt. And they'll get their babies baptised in it. And then they'll turn around and hang them up on the wall as a wall hanging.

KT It'll be dual purpose?

HB Yeah. I've made a lot of those too. They either get white or pale yellow and they get them baptised and then they hang them up on the wall as a wall hanging. And then some people just get big quilts for wall hangings. I don't know what people use them for.

KT I've seen them at pow-wows where the dancers will have them in their arms.

HB That's when they're going to give them away.

KT So that's before they give them away?

HB Yeah. Where they carry them.

KT How long does it take you to make a quilt?

HB Well, it all depends on if I work on it continuously without stopping. I imagine about three days. Because you have to cut it out. You have to sew it. You have to fill it in. You have to quilt it. About three days.
KT How many quilts do you think you make in a month? Just an average guess in a month... maybe, four... or five?

HB Oh geez, it kind of slowed down now, but I was doing, oh geez, this past month I must have did about, past month and a half, about fifteen.

KT Wow.

HB This lady from Fort Belnap was having a feast that she lost.... her grandson passed away in a car accident and it was going to be a year. So I was making two to three to four a month for her. And then I have this other lady from Washington, I was telling you about, she orders two queen size a month. And in between there....

KT Does she sell them in a shop?

HB No, she gives them to her family members. In between there it was just off and on. Like the pow-wow, Fraser pow-wow, was going on so I did two for a lady there, satin ones. And then, Fort Kipp pow-wow was going on so then I did one for that lady. I thought I wasn't going to get done. It just was all piling up. I was finally thinking "why don't you just star refusing because it was just too much". But, I got them done. And I hate to tell a person "no". Because I know that if they go to another place they will charge them really high. Look at the museum, cotton ones are a hundred and forty-five. And at that Indian store there I saw them yesterday it was two hundred and twenty-five. I know the Indian people can't afford that. So I hate to tell them "no". My husband said "it's about time you start saying *no'". But that's hard to do.

KT But, that was a little busier than usual, right?

HB Yeah. I can't give you an average because it just varies. It just really varies. Like sometimes I'll maybe do eight a month. Sometimes maybe four. Just back and forth. During the summer months it picks up, the pow-wows, or somebody's having a feast and they have a whole year to save.

KT Will they be commissioning quilts the whole year?

HB Yeah. Like this lady did at Fort Belnap. She had hers the tenth, so I'm done with her now.

KT How many quilts did she present?

HB I don't know, but I think I did about twelve for her. I don't know. She's from Fort Belnap.

KT Do you see a greater demand for the star quilts now, than say, ten years ago?

HB No, not really, because I think everybody kind of got the hang
of making them now. So everybody just kind of makes their own now. Just about everybody I know makes them now except for a few people.

KT But you're still pretty busy with commissions.

HB I use to make them for a guy from California too and he'd make a little name tag for me. Made by Helen Boyd in Brockton, Montana. He was commissioner of_________________. Some guy had a little shop out there. That's where the wall hangings and baby quilts came in because everybody wanted a wall hanging. But, I quit. It was too much. It does get hectic after awhile. Your fingers get sore quilting. Mine are just barely healing up. And then your finger turns black from the needle.

KT You probably gets some pretty hard calluses on the ends of your fingers.

HB Yeah, but then they fall off. Then you start all over again. It's just one big cycle. You think you're through and then somebody else.....like, I thought I was through. The only one I had was that satin one to do. For the lady that was here yesterday, remember, when I came. That's her satin. I said, "I'm not even through with your satin quilt". "Well I want you to make ten sets of pillows". And her give-away is Saturday.

KT Do you usually work during the day?

HB Yeah. I never sew at night because it's too hard on your eyes. I finally had to break down and get bifocals. For the lacing of the needles. I used to have to take off my glasses so I could see. It's good because you can't tell that they are bifocals. It's a new kind. You can't tell.

KT Other than the glasses, are there any other problems, particular problems?

HB Just if sometimes a person has a starchy blanket. They are so hard to quilt.

KT The material?

HB Yeah. And your arms do actually get sore from quilting a hard blanket.

KT Once you set it up, then you quilt it within a day or two?

HB Yeah. Her and I, we try to get it off the... we start early in the morning and then try to get it off the racks in the afternoon.

KT So in a day? You'll have it done in a day?

HB Yeah. My livingroom is so small.
KT You set it up. You set it up right in the livingroom?

HB Yeah. You have to rearrange everything to fit your blanket in there.

KT It takes up the whole room.

HB A baby quilt's not so bad. But a big blanket... up to the queens and the kings... one time when I did that king, I don't know, I must have did about three kings now. It takes the whole livingroom because they're 105"x 108". They're huge. But as you can see, I don't have star quilts anywhere in my house, except for my son's bed.

KT I'm just checking over here if there's anything else. I think that's really wanted to ask about. Does your mother still do star quilts?

HB My mom passed away. It'll be five years in January. And my grandmother passed away twelve years in December.

KT Do you have any sisters?

HB No. No brothers. No sisters.

KT So your the star quilter. And then your daughter.

HB Well, I'm teaching her. Yes. There's her first pair of pot holders over there. See, I've got hanging up in the kitchen over there. Everything's by hand there, see. She did that when she was about ten years old. About twelve years old.

KT Do you think that the young girls are interested in learning how to do the star quilting?

HB I don't know about the other young girls but I know she is. She likes to be at home. Now she's beading. She's beading some combs. I taught her how to bead. She's got the patience to sit there and do that. But she's making them for college in the fall. She's going for nursing. I'll have to be quilting myself.

KT Any funny incidents that happened when you were making star quilts?

HB Well, one time I had my blanket up in here and my granddaughter was here and she was fooling around. She climbed up the chair, and she fell. I just had it up and she fell right in the middle of it. She popped all pins.

KT It probably scared her.

HB Yeah. She started crying and I had to hold her. I told her that there was nothing to worry about. I just pinned it back up. And another time too, I had a star quilt up, a satin one, red satin
one too and we went to the tournament and we had a cat and the cat got on it. It was a mess. I ended up just throwing that blanket out.

KT That's too bad.

HB But otherwise, you try to get it up and get it off right away so nothing does happen. One time too, a friend and I were quilting a blanket. Her little girl had a pop. They must have only been about five four or five years old. She said "here momma" and she reached up and put that on the blanket and it spilled. Good thing it wasn't my blanket. It was a friend's blanket. It was her girl that did it. That pop just came through that blanket.

KT Did she get it off?

HB I don't know. It's not good to quilt with little ones around. It's hard to quilt with little ones around because they want this and they want that. They want to see what you're doing. My granddaughter when I'm sewing, "Grandma what's this. Grandma what's that". Questions, really questions. It's hard to quilt when there are little ones around. Even to sew. But that's about it.

KT I'd like to thank you for this interview.

HB I hope it helps you.