

Maureen and Mike

# Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

## **Archives and Special Collections**

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: [library.archives@umontana.edu](mailto:library.archives@umontana.edu)

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

The transcript with its associated audio recording was provided to Archives and Special Collections by the Star Quilts Oral History Project.

**Oral History Number: 285-001**  
**Interviewees: Sybil Lambert and Barney Lambert**  
**Interviewer: Kim Taylor**  
**Date of Interview: July 13, 1992**  
**Project: Star Quilts Oral History Project**

Kim Taylor: This is Kim Taylor interviewing Sybil Lambert at her home in Brockton Montana, July 13, 1992. I'd like to know a little bit more about the ladies Presbyterian group and the prize quilts that are made.

Sybil Lambert: Our local churches, we sew, sell our quilts, or make aprons, have a lot of sales. And then that's how we raise money for our church. Every fall we have a mission meeting, where all our churches, 27 churches, meet the second week of August. They invite the meetings. Now this year it will be in Eagle Butte South Dakota. Our ladies, we sew quilts. These are usually star quilts. And, of course, it's got to be all done by hand. Even the sewing around the edges. And then, we have ladies there to judge. I don't know how many years we've been taking first. Sometimes it's three quilts and sometimes we do a lot of quilts. We do that every year. As long as I can remember. Even when I was small my mother used to belong to ladies' aid.

KT: So do they have first place, second, and third?

SL: Yes. So that's what we're doing now.

KT: How do they sell these quilts?

SL: Well, last year, they hung them up kind of like a big top where we met the ladies. Then they hung them on all around the tent. A lady from that local church went to buy it. So I sold it to her. That's how they do it. Some of them buy, or someone at home already would ask that they would want to buy it. They would take it just to show. so that's what they do to sell them. And then the money we make we just give it right to the church.

KT: I'd like a little bit of background information about you personally. Where you were born and raised.

SL: Oh, I was born here, right here in Brockton.

KT: When did you begin quilting?

SL: I started, this was after I got married. I didn't know how to sew at all. I asked my sister-in-law if she would show me or make me a quilt. She said it's easy. She never did make me one, she showed me. After that, I'd buy the material, take it down to her, she'd put the colors together, and then I'd cut them out. of course, if I didn't know, I'd go ask her. That was after I

got married. I didn't know how to sew at all.

KT: Thirty years ago, or forty years ago?

SL: I was in my 20s then. About 40-some years ago that I started sewing.

KT: You're married to Barney. When did you get married?

SL: We got married in 1946.

KT: How many children do you have?

SL: I have seven. We have—I just have to count. I got all my grandchildren pictures on the wall there. But we do have about three great-grandchildren and I count about 18 grandchildren.

KT: When you quilt, is it something that you do by yourself, or do you work with some others?

SL: When I work for myself, I work by myself. Sometimes my daughter helps me. I got three, but Tammy, she don't quilt. That one's married to Bernice's son. But the other two, an older one usually helps me.

KT: I talked to Tammy today and she said that she is interested in learning.

SL: Yes, once in awhile. It's starts hurting her fingers, and what I'm afraid of getting blood on the quilt. She helps me, but most of the time, I do—see, I'll show you, these are the quilt stitches that I use.

KT: You sketch it out across, so that if someone, your daughter were to help you, you would do the sewing, the patchwork, and she would help you quilt.

SL: Yes, then I'd put it all on there and then we each sit on one end. We sit like that. And most of the time, the quickest way is we'd just sew the fans like that, fan stitching. Or sometimes, I take orders, and if they wanted it quilted fancy, or quilted around with diamonds or try to make it fancy. But most of the time it's just the fan. To me that's the quickest way.

KT: I noticed that with the fan stitching.

SL: Some sew what they call crazy map stitch. One like that, then one like that. It does make a pretty design but, to me, that takes me longer to do that than sewing the fans which I use about five rows. I like to sew, I mean, not quilt. Now a days, I see where they have these machines that make the quilts look like comforters. I think it's better just to hand quilt them.

KT: Do you think the hand quilting is valued more?

SL: Yeah.

KT: I like it better. So, what kind of materials do you use in your quilts?

SL: Polyester or taffeta. And satin, some of the other ones use satin, but I'm allergic to satin so I don't use satin, but Taffeta I do. It all depends on the people that ask they all choose what they want. This is just a polyester and cotton blend.

KT: Is it trickier to use the taffeta than the cotton?

SL: No. Well, with the taffeta I use pinking shears because otherwise it will unravel, the edges would unravel. But with the pinking shears it cuts them. I don't think it's that hard. To do it with satin, you'd have to cut strips, and then you'd have to take them and lay them face up, the shining side up like that. Otherwise, if you just cut it some of that shiny would be turned over. I sew, well most of the women do that, sew like that. This is straight. I sew all the straight.

KT: Oh, I see. Go in the same direction.

SL: And then this is bias. That's why I like to use taffeta because you can turn it over on either side.

KT: Is there a difference in value between a satin or a taffeta quilt and a cotton quilt?

SL: Satin and taffeta, yeah, they're priced higher than the cotton. Well then now, there is cotton—100 percent cotton they have—but I don't care to use that. It reminds me of burlap, the 100 percent cotton.

KT: You don't like the feel of it?

SL: We always use polyester.

KT: Where do you get your materials?

SL: Since we got in Williston, about 50, 60 miles, a Walmart that sells real reasonable. Otherwise, we get it in Poplar, or Ben Franklin's. Like now, like I see in Walmart, they don't have that many colors. Poplar does. As far as the women, they know that our women really sew those, so they really get the colors.

KT: I noticed that they had just a few prints. Most of what they had were the bright solid colors in Poplar.

SL: Some of them use a print, small like little flowers printed or like the taffeta and the satin use

the polyester because they say it will not slip when people put it on the bed. Otherwise, if you use polyester or taffeta it would just slide off. A lot of them use that. If I make one, I just use a plain but it would be a polyester.

KT: You always pretty much use a solid color. You don't use prints.

SL: I think it's prettier. Like I say, I could an old one. Now I got this to make.

KT: How about the age of a quilt. Does that have anything to do with the value of a quilt. The older a quilt gets it becomes more valuable?

SL: I think so. I've got some—in fact, they're not finished yet just like this here, this star. I made it when my mother was living. I never completed it, and that's about 20 years ago. One thing about these here—you can wash them, and they don't fade. The colors don't fade. I think the value, the older they get the more valuable.

KT: What distinguishes a good quilt from a bad quilt?

SL: I think it's just the way it's made. The sewing, I won't say.

KT: The way the pieces come together.

Barney Lambert: You can tell her about the stitching, the way the stitching is. I've looked at quilts over there in South Dakota and there is terrible stitching. I'll say it. And still, they sell for maybe \$300, \$400.

SL: And some of them make the diamonds so big. Like, I use, if I take time, maybe I use she's eight, see we go by this here, this center here, so there's six here. So you can imagine for the size like this and using just four, so you can imagine those diamonds are big.

KT: So then you just end up with less color, right when you have a bigger diamond?

SL: Yeah.

KT: How about color combinations. If somebody has a particularly good color combination does that qualify as a better quilt?

SL: I don't know if that's, a long time ago some of the women used purple and orange. Of course, now a days you can use any color, like blue and green. And a long time ago, I never used red and pink together like that, you know, the blue and green. The women all have their own colors. Some are orange and green or orange and blue. I guess it's all—I don't know, what are you supposed to call it? Yellow, red, blue—the basic colors.

KT: Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple.

BL: You know, a lot of times the ladies come and ask her to put colors together for them. I noticed that she's made star quilts for just by the red color of the rainbow.

SL: I've got a color chart. I mean, I wrote the colors down. We were going to Poplar that day, and oh, that rainbow was so pretty and just the colors were so clear. So I wrote the colors down, and I made one.

KT: So it's a rainbow quilt.

SL: Yeah, a rainbow quilt. I could have changed the colors but then this is the way it laid. It had that pretty lavender, purple lavender. It was pretty. Or any place. I always look at colors any place we go. It's just something that I like. Pictures—I just look at the colors.

KT: So you're always thinking quilts in the back of your mind.

SL: Yeah, even after I go to bed I think if I have to make a quilt for someone and I think out the colors. Yeah. I do. Star quilts—I think it's part of me sometimes. Especially when I have to set it up and it's in the middle of the dining room.

KT: Do the colors that you choose have any particular meaning, other than what pleases your eye?

SL: Yeah.

KT: Do you name any of your quilts?

SL: No.

BL: Well, you got one that you've made quite a few of those. Not the same way, but you've changed the colors on them using the fall colors.

SL: I like working with fall colors.

BL: You know how the leaves turn in autumn.

SL: I notice that the Indian women don't really go for those colors. Like, I cut this one out for our ladies, and I know that they don't care too much for it, but oh, it's pretty. But then they like the colors like this red and blue—

BL: Wild colors, they like.

SL: Yeah, I notice that.

KT: I do too. I like a lot of color. How many quilts do you think you make in a year?

SL: Oh gee, I don't know. I don't know.

BL: It kind of comes in spurts. That one year we had this—the tribe up there is in joint venture and then drilling oil wells with a permit. They called up U.S. Energy. How many did they want for those people that time? Ten? Eight?

SL: Eight. I made eight. But they wanted taffeta. Those were all taffeta.

KT: In what amount of time?

BL: Well I don't know. She probably remembers, but it was in a short time because they were coming up to notify her in I think, about a week. Week and a half a head of time. They were coming up for a meeting. The tribe wanted to present them with those quilts. It took you about—of course, she got other ladies involved in it too that time.

SL: Here they are right here.

KT: So, how much time did it take you to make those?

SL: I'm always sewing in a hurry.

BL: It was a short time, anyway.

SL: Maybe, about, not quite a month. And in May, I made eight. My son wanted eight quilts for his basketball team. And those, I think I made in three weeks. But it was taffeta, you know.

KT: So other than a big request like that, how many do you make in a month? One or two?

SL: Like now I've got this one and then a lady wants me to stitch, I mean, quilt one. And then two baby quilts I have to make. And this one here that I made.

KT: Now is that a black? That's really nice. The colors just jump right out.

SL: This one I made for a lady from Custer South Dakota. The colors she wanted, earth colors.

KT: I can't quite tell what colors those are.

SL: Green. Then on one end she wanted 35 inches longer you know to put over the pillows.

KT: Oh, I see. So it's not exactly square.

SL: No, this is a king-size quilt.

KT: You do quite a few commissions?

SL: Yeah. And then this one here, that was supposed to be songbirds. This one I made for some lady for her baby. That's a crib size.

KT: That looks like a pretty big crib size. Would it go on a single bed?

SL: No, 45 by 60 [inches]. That is usually crib size. This I wanted to try. I took a picture of that at some museum.

KT: That's put together with the triangles.

SL: They are all diamonds. Now this is one of the prize quilts. Some church ladies...

KT: So that's been all hand stitched?

SL: Everything's handstitched.

KT: That's beautiful.

SL: This is another baby quilt. It looks large but it's a 45 by 60. Now that's a different design.

KT: I notice that the star motif is there.

SL: There the diamonds are square. They're not perfect. Here's a taffeta quilt that I made. This is a baby quilt. Now these are orders. This one lady wanted gold color on red. So I made that. This lady wanted turquoise color on yellow.

KT: And that's taffeta?

SL: Yes. And this is that one, that huge quilt that took me a week to quilt it because I have to quilt so far and then take it all off and move it.

KT: So something that isn't quite as big as that, how long does it usually take to quilt?

SL: A couple days.

KT: Within your family, what are some of the occasions when you would make a star quilt to give as a gift?

SL: Graduation for my granddaughters.

KT: Graduation from high school?

SL: Yes. I have two granddaughters that graduated and I made them each a quilt. And like now, every year now we have to—as long as John is in high school playing basketball, well, then I have to make one for him. Then if they—like this past year, they went all the way up to state. We have to make quite a few. In a week, we'd have to sew them all.

KT: That's amazing. How about the birth of a new baby in the family?

SL: Yeah.

KT: And weddings?

SL: Not really. I don't make them myself but if they order them. I think this is going to be a—I don't know what made me think that was going to be a wedding gift. She wanted it in July. If they order. Most of the time I take orders.

KT: Right this minute I'm interested in gift giving within the family, other than commissioned work, for just right now. And how about funerals, something like that? Not necessarily. Okay, but those would be things that might be commissioned from you, right? A wedding gift, or a quilt for a funeral, something like that? Or a baby quilt too because you showed me pictures of baby quilts.

SL: Yeah. For Newborn babies. In fact, I have a—my grandchildren, when they were babies, sometimes I would wait until after they were born. Otherwise, I'd put it on yellow so it could be for either a girl or a boy.

KT: Now some of these questions I'm going to direct at you, Barney. Who presents a quilt when you have a give-away?

SL: You mean for basketball, or when they have a celebration, a powwow?

KT: They're separate things, right? But do they call them—

BL: They call them after ceremonies. Like at the district tournament or the divisional tournament, at the state tournament they asked me to emcee the star quilt give-away. I was telling a little bit of history, why we're doing it and stuff like that.

KT: That's what this is here, right? Who would do it at the, say, Iron Ring celebration this weekend?

BL: They have regular emcees. They've got somebody that they hire. They call them announcers. They would do the emceeing for whoever. Or else, a family will pick a certain person that they would want them to emcee for them.

KT: I would like you to describe to me what goes on—we'll talk about the basketball games because that is what is really unique to this area. My sense is that Sybil would make a quilt for her grandson to give away to someone. I want to know, who you would give it to, and why? And then the process. Is it during half time that they do this? And then they present all the quilts?

BL: It's usually between the championship game and the semi-final game—for third and fourth and the championship game. It's usually in between there. But then as far as them giving it to different individuals, why that's really up to them. Like if they're giving away in honor of their son, it would be up to their son to designate one of the players, from another team or possibly one of their coaches. Or else maybe somebody from, you know, just a spectator. Possibly they've been friends with or they've met, or that they know through basketball. Like that. It's all up to the individual that they are honoring. Whoever wants to give it. Or else, he's got a friend up here that he's been good friends with. Somebody maybe from Troy or Medicine Lake or Sidney. They present it to the parents. So that's how they do that. It's all up to the person that they're honoring, whoever designates to give them to.

KT: They would be called out? And then the family would come—

SL: The parents of the boys named, you see. All of the parents of the—

BL: I would say like the quilt to the parents of that boy. and then they would come with the boy. But then they would take the quilt and give it to the parents.

SL: They put it on their—usually their mother. Get the list from the coaches and then you pick whichever one you want to give for our sons. Another thing that we used to do, of course we used to all get together to make sure that one quilt wasn't the same color. That each one was a different color. And then that time, the boy, our son, would walk out there carrying the quilts, like that lay them on the floor. The person that I'm telling you about would call coaches. I don't know how many years he gave the coaches. Of course, now it's all different. They give it to the parents.

KT: So how many quilts would they give away at one basketball game?

BL: Oh, usually 10 or 12. Like usually like when they go to a tournament or something, they take 12—ten of their main players and two alternates. And now besides that, each cheerleader will give away. So that's what, another, we have four. And then we have two managers, so even the managers are giving them away now.

KT: When did the cheerleaders start doing this?

SL: I think it started when—we were talking about that that one time. Josie, you see, her daughter, years ago—

BL: Twenty years ago.

SL: Lyle's sister. Fifteen, twenty years ago the cheerleaders started.

KT: As I can see her, that was going on, maybe 20 years before that with the basketball players.

SL: There was that one boy, that was Dennis.

BL: You see, this tradition, this goes on way back. It always did happen. The Indian people are great ones for honoring their children, their relatives, or whoever. I mean anything. It's like what I got in there. In the old days when there were still wars going on. Like if they came back and they won a victory in war they would come and honor them. They would give a bunch of stuff away in their honor. That's how that all started. Now today in modern times it's the star quilt. But in those days, they gave away horses, whatever they could in their honor. Probably meat and buffalo hides, and of course in those days they were valuable. But something that was valuable to them they would give away to honor someone. If they went out and stole horses from the enemy and brought them back. They would make a big deal out of that. Just something that they did that was really great they would really get out and honor them. That's as far as the Indian people can remember back. It always did happen.

KT: The honor is in giving away something?

SL: Like remember I used to have a peace pipe. I had it somehow on the wall. When—of course he died a quite a few years ago—he came, and he told us to put that away. Anybody can come in and say I like that, and you see, you'd have to give it to them.

BL: That's another tradition that Indian people have. If you go visit one of your Indian friends, if there's something hanging on the wall, or if you see something and, oh gee, I like that, the people will get up and will give it to you.

SL: This is a...I didn't mean to see it...Well, anyway, this is from my niece in Rapid City. It was on the wall. I said "oh, that's pretty" and you know, I never thought—here it was her son-in-law. I said "Gee, that's pretty," and I asked him who made it. And here, we were talking; someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned around. He had that. He gave it to me. I was so embarrassed. But like that.

BL: This is what they usually tell you, like she's telling you. One of the older Indians, she had

that peace pipe up there, and he said, "You better put that away because if someone ever comes and says that they like that, you're going to have to give it to them." Something that's real valuable, he said, never put it up on your wall, because if they come and say that they like that, well, it's going to have to go. Indians are great ones for that. Giving things away. Either in honor of someone, or whatever. These celebrations, have you been to these celebrations?

KT: We're going this weekend to the Iron Ring.

BL: You see a lot of that, people donating. Each one has a turn. Each one has a time when they're donating something.

KT: Is this a continual process during the celebration?

BL: All during the day, yeah, during the day. They have all their giveaways during the day. And they dance at night. And like if somebody who gets out there who is dancing for the first time, they go up there, their parents will probably donate something valuable for the first time that that person is dancing.

KT: What other things are given away besides star quilts?

BL: It's mostly blankets, star quilts and Pendletons, Of course, a lot of these people, usually the mothers, a lot of them will give material away, shawls and like washcloths, towels and washcloths, stuff like that.

SL: Then they just pass that out. Material. But sometimes, once in a great while, they give away horses.

BL: Of course, I very seldom see that anymore.

SL: Remember, they gave horses. They bring a horse into that arbor or arena, whatever you call it where they're dancing. Then they tell who their giving them to.

BL: A lot of them give away money. They'll honor somebody by—what they'll do is sing them an honor song. That family has to get out there and dance during that honor song. And the person that they're honoring that they're going to give away for sometimes will have money pin all over. Bills, you know. They'll pick certain people to come up and get those.

KT: How is a star quilt used and displayed?

SL: They throw them out onto the ground.

KT: After they are given away. How do people use these?

BL: A lot of them say, I'm not going to use this. I'm going to put this on display in my house. And then, a lot of them will say, well, you stay warm during the winter.

SL: I suppose some of them use them, and then some don't. I don't know.

KT: Are they used for any ceremonial purposes, the star quilts?

BL: I think the star quilt is seen no matter what. No matter what kind of celebration, kind of pow-wow, what kind of ceremony going on. You'll see the star quilt. Because it's supposed to be one of the valuable ones. That's what they give away, something that's valuable or used. So it kind of used just about everywhere, I guess.

KT: Do you see it as a symbol of a particular tribe?

BL: The Fort Peck tribe is known for star quilts. Each tribe known for something. Like her, the Fort Peck tribe is known for giving away star quilts.

SL: Oh Barney, I think it's the Sioux. In South Dakota, they do that.

BL: Well, not so much star quilts. They give star quilts, but not like they do here. Star quilts are a big thing here. On other reservations, they don't really give that much.

KT: I've seen them just outside of Missoula, but they don't have the giveaways like they do here. It's not the same at all. I know that in North and South Dakota, it's kind of similar to Fort Peck, but I don't think that they have the basketball games.

SL: I know that South Dakota they have—

BL: They give away things like canned meat things over there.

SL: And I noticed they, it's never, maybe once in a while, a complete quilt. It's usually just the top. My niece, they were having a naming ceremony.

BL: I noticed that one time that people were giving away handmade purses with the strap on them made out of buffalo hide. Some of the fur, buffalo fur, is still on there. Made out of that; then they'd make some kind of design on it, like a buffalo head or whatever. Stuff like that they give away. Or else, some kind of necklace.

KT: So the different areas are know for what they give away?

BL: Yeah. Here it's the star quilt.

KT: What does the symbol of the star mean?

BL: The star? Well, you got me there. I really don't know. That's one thing I never thought about.

SL: The ladies all say that the missionary women, I guess, were the ones that brought that design here. The quilting was. Minister Reverend Red Lightning (?), he was our minister for 17, 18 years. His wife—they came from South Dakota, and my mother used to tell that his wife was the one that showed the ladies that fan stitch quilting.

KT: But did they already have the star design?

SL: Oh yeah. So that was way before. I really don't know that. I imagine maybe the older people, I suppose. Down this way there are hardly any old people now. They're all gone. I don't know.

KT: Do you think there is a greater demand for the star quilt now than there was 10 or 20 years ago?

SL: I think so.

KT: It's not anything that's going to disappear.

SL: I don't think so. Especially now with the non-Indians. They really—

BL: If there's something going on, you'll find people going around looking for star quilts. They can pick up a few here and there.

SL: Just before you came, I got a call from—he wanted to know if I had a taffeta star quilt on hand. I said, "I don't even have a regular star quilt." Now that was for a gift to give to her daughter's boss. It's like that. She called Ashland. She's originally from here, but she's married now. That's what she wanted it for, for a gift.

BL: Anything like a gift, for a friend or someone that you're good friends with. They'll usually go for the star quilt and give it as a gift. The star quilt will be around for a long time.

KT: That's really all I had for questions, unless there is anything that you'd like to add.

SL: I think that you would find that interesting.

KT: The article? Yeah, I want to read this. I just want to thank you for this interview.

BL: Like I say, if you're going to the Iron Ring celebration, you'll see. You'll get a firsthand look at the donations there. It's interesting, but then again, you have so many of them giving away like

that. It kind of gets boring later on. To see, if you've never seen it before, why, it's interesting.

KT: It's pretty new to me.

BL: But to us, we see it celebration after celebration, basketball game after basketball game. But then it's still—think it's something because it's our tradition.

SL: Like that time you went to Washington D.C. Was it Marlenee's office [Ron Marlenee]? Here, there's a star quilt on the wall. Here he told his secretary that—

BL: Melcher [John Melcher]. It was when Melcher was a senator. We went to his office. I knew had been presented with that star quilt because she had made it. It had something to do with all the reservations, what each, what are these, star points?

SL: I don't like that. That don't look like—that don't look like a teepee.

KT: Yeah, it does.

SL: I made it like this. So it came like that. Each one, eight of them then peace pipes.

BL: This represents the seven reservations with the Fort Washakie reservation in Wyoming.

KT: So this was presented on behalf of all of those reservations?

BL: And this here is where they're all supposed to camped like this in a circle. This is supposed to be a bonfire. this is what their talking about, this peace pipe. We made that trip to Washington D.C. We had to see him. We walked into his office and I looked up and here was this quilt hanging. I was telling these people, I know where that quilt came from. My wife made that quilt. It was really something to see. He had it hanging right above his desk.

SL: And that was taffeta. That one that he is talking about.

KT: Thank you.

[End of Interview]