

**FROM THE MORNING CALL – Allentown PA**  
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## **ARTICLE 1 OF 4 IN A SERIES**

### **How a hill tribe from Laos changed a Pennsylvania tradition**

- The Hmong who made Lancaster County home brought sewing skills they adapted to quilt making.

Story by Kathleen Parrish Photography by Douglas Benedict Of The Morning Call

*First of a four-part series*

Narathi Palua is sewing in the tropical sunshine. His head, shaved but for a few black tufts, is bent in concentration and his long fingers deftly pull a silver needle through the heavy fabric. He is 13, gangly, all legs and arms and neck, but his feet — easily a size 10 — anchor his frame and portend a growth spurt.

It is monsoon season in northern Thailand, but Narathi seems oblivious to the smothering heat and the throbbing music of cicadas that herald the coming rains.

He could be riding his bike through the overgrown paths of the surrounding jungle or collecting crabs in the cool waters of the Yom River. Instead, he is making an American quilt that is likely destined for Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

In Narathi's village of Ban Pa Deang, quilts spill from the open doorways of homes, women drive by on motor scooters clutching them rolled up in clear plastic, and porches have been converted to outdoor sewing rooms where scraps of fabric litter the tiled floors like a calico snowstorm.

Quilting brings prosperity, so everyone sews — gap-toothed grandmothers, smooth-faced boys, young mothers. From morning's first light until dusk, they sit cross-legged beneath rough-hewn quilting frames, stabbing stitches fine as rice. Others prefer to sew outdoors with the roosters, the smell of warm earth and an occasional breeze.

In this 1,200-year-old village quilting is the economic engine. Teak homes have computers with Internet service, girls go to private school, and the Buddhist temple, surrounded by the shimmering gold tail of a red-tongued dragon, glitters in a coat of red and green jewels. The temple is the most conspicuous symbol of the village's wealth. It is both beautiful and gaudy, and it is the first thing you see when entering this dusty hamlet shaded by mango and palm trees.

Narathi will earn 40 baht, about a dollar, for stitching the binding along the edges of an early American-style Rose of Sharon quilt that will easily sell for more than \$600 in the United States. He's only been sewing for a month. He does it to help his mother.

The villagers do not know that they are participants in the transformation of a quintessentially American industry. But they do know the man who brings the work to their village each month. He is not Thai, like them, but Hmong, a member of a once-fierce and primitive tribe from the hills of Laos that fought on the side of the Americans during the Vietnam War.

He and his displaced countrymen in the United States are the key to a metamorphosis of the quilt trade that began more than 20 years ago.

And in the last five years, the Hmong have become entrepreneurial links between Third-World Thai villagers and post-modern Westerners with money to spend on a piece of an imagined past.

The Hmong's pivotal role in the business of handmade quilts began when a small group, about 30 families, arrived during the late 1970s in the farmlands of Pennsylvania, frightened and destitute. They already had endured the misery of teeming refugee camps in Thailand after a harrowing flight from the communist soldiers who overran their native land in the aftermath of the Southeast Asian war.

Many Hmong came to the United States after the war, most settling in California. But the Mennonites of Pennsylvania Dutch country sponsored this group of desperate refugees through the Mennonite church.

These people of northern European origin had much in common with the Hmong, despite being from opposite sides of the world. Both cultures were agrarian, insular, deeply religious and bound by tradition. The new arrivals had one other thing in common with their hosts: the ability to ply a needle with grace, a skill the Amish and Mennonites admired and valued. The connection between these peoples eventually would push the cottage industry of quilt making into the global marketplace, an unanticipated consequence of history's serendipity.

### **A homespun symbol**

Eight million tourists from around the world visit Pennsylvania Dutch country each year, drawn by the dream of another age.

Here, amid verdant hills, the clip-clop of horse-drawn buggies and laundry fluttering on clotheslines, a living piece of America's rustic past survives among the Amish and Old Order Mennonites. For more than 250 years, these Pennsylvania Germans have led cloistered lives in this region an hour west of Philadelphia, steadfastly resisting the jangle of modernity and preferring quiet simplicity.

Their culture is marketed in shops along two-lane Route 340, quilt country's central artery, in the form of Amish dolls in traditional black garb, hex signs, gooey shoofly pie and knickknacks that exploit the names these descendants of European immigrants gave their towns: Intercourse, Paradise, Bird in Hand.

One object exemplifies these people and their lifestyle more than any other: the hand-sewn quilt. They are piled thick for sale everywhere, in gaslit farmhouses and in dozens of stores along the main thoroughfares and back roads that wend the fields of the Central Pennsylvania region.

The quaintly named patterns — Log Cabin, Country Love, Rose of Sharon — conjure images of bonneted women working side by side in the glow of candles. In a world made cold by the hard edges of technology, quilts are soft; their creation is slow and personal and each skeleton of stitches carries the breath and moral muscle of its maker.

- It is jarring to think that these coveted squares of cloth could be anything other than a comforting piece of American heritage, sewn by Mennonites and Amish, the monarchs of American quilt making and the famous Plain People of Pennsylvania. Yet many Lancaster County quilts have become something other than what they seem.

As with so much of modern life, they've been touched by cataclysm and by ancient forces of the human heart: war and love, charity and greed, hypocrisy and hope.

## **New direction for old custom**

"Can I sew for you?"

It was 1985, and the tiny Asian woman asked her question in halting English, keeping her gaze on the floor as she held up a sample of her work.

Emma Witmer had never seen one of these new arrivals to Pennsylvania Dutch country. And she certainly didn't need any more quilt tops. But she bought two from the dark-haired woman anyway. She wanted to help a stranger in need. It's what Old Order Mennonites do. They reach out to the poor. And here on Emma's front porch was a refugee from one of the most primitive cultures in the world.

At the time, Emma had not yet become the unassuming queen of Lancaster quilt making, but she was on her way. She had just taken over her mother's shop as the older woman's mind became cloudy. Her mother had first forgotten the names of longtime customers. Then she forgot the names of her children.

So Emma assumed her mother's role. Her youth was already well behind her. She had married a man she had grown to love, a persistent suitor who convinced her their union was part of God's plan. Her wedding dress had been a simple blue-gray frock and she wore it until the seams frayed.

That is what her religion dictates. Nothing wasted. "Thy will be done."

Selling quilts was not something Emma's family had set out to do. But, they knew, the path beneath our feet is not always clear. God provides a way.

That is what the Amish and Mennonites believed when they fled their European persecutors in the late 1600s for a new life in America. Emma Witmer can trace her roots to the mid-1800s when her ancestors settled in the farmlands of Pennsylvania, the colony founded by William Penn as an experiment in religious tolerance and brotherhood.

The family did not know how to quilt then. None of the Amish or Mennonites did. In Germany and Switzerland, they were weavers, covering their beds with diamond-patterned blankets. They adopted the art of quilting from their English neighbors in this new land and integrated it into their own culture. They made quilts to counter winter's chill, give as wedding gifts and welcome new babies.

It never occurred to Mother Good, as Emma's mother was known, that someone outside their community would pay money for a quilt. That changed in 1959, when an enterprising fabric salesman from Philadelphia appeared at the Goods' roadside stand in Lancaster, where the family sold the eggplant, peppers, potatoes, peas and tobacco they grew.

The man offered to try to sell some of Mother Good's quilts in Philadelphia. That winter, she sewed 12 and handed the bundle to the salesman.

When he returned a year later he had sold only two.

"What do we do now?" Mother Good asked.

"Put a sign out," her husband said.

They did. Business thrived. Twenty-five years later, on the day when Emma Witmer encountered her strange visitor, the shop was still going strong. As it does today.

## In plain sight

It is a warm September afternoon in Lancaster County and Rick the mailman has just dropped off the day's offering at Witmer Quilt Shop: four bulging cardboard boxes swathed in clear tape. Emma, 67, the mother of seven, grandmother of 19, pulls a knife from the pocket of her apron and slices one open. Inside is a half-finished baby blue Postage Stamp quilt from Lydia Martin, an Amish woman from Mifflinburg, Union County.

"Lydia's mother sewed for my mother," Emma says, shaking out the quilt in the sunshine to inspect the stitches.

Like a guiding principle of her Mennonite faith, uniformity is prized when sewing together the three layers — top, filler, back — of a quilt. Stitches must be tiny. They must be close. They must be straight. Otherwise it is a hodgepodge of footprints all setting out in different directions, lost in a forest of fabric without the compass of a steady hand.

No one knows this better than Emma. She isn't boastful about her ability to create a sublime quilt. That would violate the Old Order Mennonite teaching of humility. It is better to say that she is confident.

Confident, like the time she was 4 and sewed an apron for her rag doll. No one had taught her how to form the stitches that joined the strings to the white bib. She just knew.

Today, visitors from as far as Japan and Switzerland come to Emma's cluttered shop on Route 23 in New Holland, a typical, picturesque Lancaster County hamlet. They come with credit cards in hand, ready to spend hundreds of dollars for the one-of-a-kind creations piled 60 high on two beds in Emma's shop.

Emma's weathered hands no longer sew the quilts. She is the designer, a Mennonite version of New York fashion diva Vera Wang. Her clothes may be plain, shadows and soot, but her head swims with calicos and checks, paisley and polka dots.

She is the center of a remarkable supply chain that feeds the demand for quilts, which began in earnest in 1955 when a Broadway play called "Plain and Fancy," an Amish love story set in Bird in Hand, tickled the public imagination. The play evoked curiosity about the Amish, and drew people from New York and Philadelphia to Lancaster County. There they discovered quilts and began snapping them up.

On this same September day, a car pulls up in front of Emma's shop and two Australians, Jenny Bellemore and Marian McClusky, scoot inside. They have traveled halfway across the world in search of something more authentic than the machine-made quilts available in Sydney. They found Emma's shop on the Internet.

"We didn't want city, we wanted purity," Bellemore says, looking around at the stacks of quilts. "I think we found it."

McClusky peers in awe at the tiny stitches of a pink tulip petal splayed on a cream background. It is a superb example of applique — a method of sewing fancy cloth cutouts, like flowers, birds and hearts, to a larger piece of cloth.

"The hand-quilting and the applique are just incredible," she says, shaking her head.

The Hmong do the applique, Emma tells them.

The women seem confused.

"They're hill people from Laos who fled to Thailand during the Vietnam War," Emma says with the breezy authority of a teacher delivering a history lesson.

"This is their native applique," Emma says, having peeled back layers of bed coverings to reveal Harmony A-Hmong the Cultures, a cornflower blue quilt with a dozen squares of reverse applique, accomplished by cutting open a top fabric and stitching its edges under to expose a contrasting color. "It takes them six to eight weeks to do one square. Times that by 12."

"That is just stunning," McClusky says, as all three women examine the needlework, their heads nearly touching.

Emma uses about 40 Hmong to applique, a skill embedded in their culture and practiced to relieve the tedium of Thai refugee camps.

Emma is proud of her alliance with the Hmong and is quick to credit them for their exquisite work.

But she is the exception. Most quilt shop owners do not mention their Southeast Asian workers. That would spoil the image of a Lancaster quilt as the product of strictly Amish or Mennonite hands. Quilt tags in pricey shops credit the work of Lancaster's Plain People, but rarely the Hmong, who are referred to as "local Lancaster quilters" if at all.

To keep the identities of these women from the eyes of tourists, some shop owners won't allow Hmong in their stores during business hours and make them use the back door when delivering piecework. One Amish shop owner once made a Hmong seamstress hide in the coal cellar. It is the dark side of the alliance that has existed for more than two decades.

But not in Emma's shop. Since that day long ago when Bee Kha, so shy and hesitant, came to Emma's doorstep, Emma has openly merged her network of Hmong artisans with more than 100 Amish and Mennonite seamstresses here and out of state. They keep the beautiful bedcovers coming for the thousands who seek them out every year. Acknowledged or not, Hmong hands have touched many of the quilts available in Lancaster County. Other hands have touched them too.

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