



This selection of artist statements is taken from *Gee's Bend: The Women and Their Quilts*, published by Tinwood Books of Atlanta, GA in 2002.

Artists included in this unpaginated selection:

Allie Pettway (b. 1917)
Annie E. Pettway (1904-1971)
Arlonzia Pettway (b. 1923)
Creola Pettway (b. 1927)
Essie Bendolph Pettway (b. 1956)
Lucy Mingo (b. 1931)
Lucy T. Pettway (1921-2004)
Mary Lee Bendolph (b. 1935)
Mary L. Bennett (b. 1942)
Qunnie Pettway (b. 1943)
Rita Mae Pettway (b. 1941)
Ruth P. Mosely (b. 1928)

(Please note: The actual quilts are not as bright as they appear in this document. The colors in *Gee's Bend: The Women and Their Quilts* are accurate.)

ALLIE PETTWAY

The middle of three quilting sisters in Gee's Bend (the others being Sweet T. and Lutisha), Allie Pettway (b. 1917) talks about the difficult days of growing up as a subsistence farmer and the consolation that comes from making quilts with friends and relatives.



ALLIE PETTWAY
David Raccuglia photograph, 2000

I was born in 1917. My mother was named Patty Pettway, my daddy was named Warren Pettway. They farmed. I was a little girl when my mother passed. My daddy remarried after my mother passed, and I had one of the hardest times you going to have. I started raising the little children, my brothers and sisters, and I had to go to the fields and work in the mud and water. And my stepmother was kind of really mean. I do the best I could.

I came up hard. In the fields I was hoeing corn, picking cotton, pulling fodder. You know, they use to pull fodder and tie it up, scratch peanuts, strip millet. My daddy planted rice, and they had a thing that they beat it. They beat that rice and we has to get down there in that swamp, pick that old black-looking rice, I hate to talk about it 'cause it was so bad. But I lived. Thank God, the Lord brought me and he's still bringing me. And I can't complain about things I have 'cause I know how I come, and I come hard. You know how it is with a man when he's got another woman—my daddy. So the Lord brought me.

I grow up right up here on the hill where my brother Yancy live—right there from Lutisha, my sister, where she died.

I didn't go nowhere in school. First grade or second grade, or something like that. No, I didn't have nobody to make me go. You know how it was with girls. I didn't go and I didn't learn anything. I had to try to do the best I could.

I was seventeen when I got married. Got married and had a hard time when I got married, you know, 'cause he didn't have anything neither. John the Baptist Pettway, 'cause his mother got religion with him, so she named him John the Baptist. His mother was Henrietta Pettway.

We stayed right across in those woods there, when we first got married. They call this down in here where I'm at, call it "Hotel," where the cemetery's at, on the hill. That's where my daddy is. My husband and me farmed, took the babies, farmed cotton, corn, peas, peanuts, and everything like you do farm. I had thirteen head, excusing the three that passed.

My mother-in-law, Henrietta Pettway, she was staying down here the whole time that I know her since I was a little girl, 'cause John the Baptist come from up here, come right on down to my house to court me. After while, after we got married, they moved us right here—me, John the Baptist, Henrietta, and her children stay right here together. Henrietta would go to the field and help us some, but when she got old she would stay home and tend to the children. Took care of my children, that's what your mother would do. Lola, she was one of the youngest of my children. She married right here in this house and then moved up to Sodom.

I learned quilting by myself, messing up quilts, doing the best I could, you know, by being a young girl and didn't know how, just piecing whatever I could get, sewing it together trying to make quilts. That's the only way I learned, and after that, when I got married, after while, I learned pretty good. I got good ideas from my mother-in-law, Henrietta. Me and her sewed together. When I had children I had to do better. Made quilts out of old dress tails, shirt tails, that's the way I did so the children would be covered up.

Later on we started quilting up there to Candis Pettway house. I wanted to go up to Estelle Witherspoon, she had the quilting bee up in Rehoboth. My husband was trying to get under Social Security, and they didn't let me work much up there 'cause they say I couldn't work and he get the money from the government. Estelle still try to keep me and pay me undercover, but John say, "No, it's best you don't go up there," so I didn't. Estelle was so sweet, she was so nice.

Candis started the little group: Candis, Red [Candis's daughter Qunnie], [Lucy] Mingo, and sometimes my daughter Lola came by—she was kind of young, didn't come by too much. We sit out there in the yard, under that old sugarball tree, and sew together. You could walk by and see us there most every day. It went on a long time. Then me and Mingo went to quilting right out there in that little house in the front yard. My grandson Frank built it for us. Everybody piece by themselves, you know, but help one another quilt it.





ALLIE PETTWAY born 1917
Two-sided quilt: "Pinwheel" variation, and
blocks and strips. Circa 1975. Cotton and cotton/
polyester blend. 80 x 88 inches



ANNIE E. PETTWAY

The history of Gee's Bend has never been written by its people, but the town's storytellers have retained memories and anecdotes passed to them by their ancestors. One local griot is Deputy Sheriff Willie Quill Pettway, who remembers his mother, Annie E. Pettway (1904-1971).

She was born June 18, 1904. Her parents were Austin H. and Leetha Pettway. She had seven brothers and two sisters. She was married to Ed O.—they said Pettway, but he was a Williams. They changed his name to Pettway because he was living on the Pettway place, and they had to change their name as long as they stay on the place. So, when they took up the census, that's what he kept his name: Pettway. His father was Ottoway Williams. He had changed his name to Pettway, too. My parents had five boys and four girls.

My mama was a housewife and a field worker. She was picking cotton, hoeing, pulling corn, something like that. Pulling up peanuts and planting peanuts. Everything you can say on the farm, she did, but she didn't plow. Some of the women plowed, but not my mama. We didn't have no mules or nothing. The only man who had mules was the man who owned the place we living on. So, we got a bull and quit using the mule. That mule will plow along, and take a break and lay down under a tree, and you can't get him up until he's ready. He get hot, and he going to move, move to the shade.

We was walking about two miles and a half to the fields, and coming back about twelve o'clock to see about the baby, and two miles and a half back to the fields. Work until it's time to cook supper.

Mama go to the fields with a pot and put on peas that morning, and every time she'd make a round she'd push the fire up under that pot, and that evening we'd have supper already done. When we knock off that evening, we bring the pot in the house, and nothing to do but fix the food. Didn't have no good peas unless you do it that way.

My mama pieced quilts. She had to. She was piecing them in the house. My mama taught my sisters how to quilt. All my sisters know just how to make a quilt. And my sisters' daughters know what to do with a quilt.

(Illustrated on pages 309-13 are "Housetop" quilts created by four generations of women in Annie E. Pettway's family, all of whom lived together in a project house in the Sodom neighborhood.)



ANNIE E. PETTWAY
Roman Pettway photograph, n.d.,
courtesy of Rita Mae Pettway

NELLIE PETTWAY
Unidentified photographer, 1966,
courtesy of Rita Mae Pettway





ANNIE E. PETTWAY 1904-1971
"Housetop"—nine-block variation, 1930s.
Cotton, 77 x 71 inches



ARLONZIA PETTWAY

I worked on the farm with my brother Ike. He runned the farm after Daddy passed in 1941. I had started working in the field when I was twelve. I did all the usual stuff people do on a farm. I was twenty years old when I married Jennie Pettway's son, Bizzell. He was a farmer, too. Everybody was a farmer in those days. I had twelve children—four girls and eight boys. Everybody had the same crops in Gee's Bend the first ten years we farm: cotton, corn, peas, sweet potatoes. After that, we started raising turnips and cucumbers to sell to some company in Montgomery. We did that for five or six years. After that, my husband went to New York to work on a farm where they were picking peas. He done all kinds of different things up there for three years straight. He'd go last of June and stay until September.



Everybody had a log cabin when I was young. Every family built their own log cabin. The family would get together; all the men would help. About seven or eight men would get together to build a house. They would do it for each other for nothing. You didn't have to do nothing but cook some food for them. But that was before I was born. That's what my daddy tell me that's what they do. And they went from one place to another. If you needed something, they do it for you—no charge.

At first, we had a log cabin with just two rooms to it. We lived in that cabin until I was seventeen years old. Then the government came along and gave us the project houses. We had three bedrooms, a kitchen, and a dining room. I added three or four more rooms to this house, and two bathrooms—we didn't have no indoor plumbing. I got running water in here in 1974. I got electricity in here before my husband passed, I believe about 1964. My first telephone was around 1976.



I used to like to make some of everything. I made TV cabinets, made me a bed about fifteen years ago, bookshelf, planters that I use outdoors. A man gave me a buoy out of the river, and I put a car wheel rim on it and made a flowerpot. I knew how to do things. When I was nine years old, I made my sister a dress and me a dress out of blue taffeta cloth. My mama saw those two dresses and thought they was bought made. She showed those dresses off to everybody. I just had a head for doing anything. It was just born in me to make things.



ARLONZIA PETTWAY
David Raccuglia photograph, 2000

NURSE SHAMBURG DIRECTS GROUP OF GIRLS IN MAKING SICK-BED IN CLINIC. GEE'S BEND, ALABAMA Marion Post Wolcott photograph and title, 1939. Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. Arlonzia Pettway is at back left.

FOOTPATHS ACROSS THE FIELD CONNECT THE CABINS. GEE'S BEND, ALABAMA Arthur Rothstein photograph and title, 1937. Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. Lovett and Lucastle, children of Missouri and Nathaniel Pettway and siblings of Arlonzia Pettway, on their way to their home on the old Pettway plantation land. Their brother Early still lives in the house.





ARLONZIA PETTWAY born 1923
"Chinese Coins" variation. Circa 1965; quilted
in 1976. Corduroy, denim, cotton twill. 88 x 73

CREOLA PETTWAY

Delia Bennett's youngest daughter, Creola Pettway (b. 1927), is a member of a Gee's Bend gospel quartet, the White Rose, which recently celebrated its thirty-fifth anniversary.

Delia Bennett is my mother. Good old mother. When I got old enough to know her, she was making quilts, cooking, canning, couldn't nobody beat her canning. She canned anything she wants to can, without a book—in her head. Lot of times, you don't need to go to a book for everything. You need some of the stuff God put in you. That's the way I am.



I like to sing but I'm about to give it up. Every time I'm about to give it up, something tell me to go ahead—the prize is at the end. If I keep on singing I probably make it to glory. But if I stop singing, that cut off some of my work.

We had four brothers and seven sisters. My daddy was Eddie Bennett. We farmed. They didn't let us go to the fields when we was small. We had to get up some size before we go. I did enjoy farming, but if I had to go now, I'd be too lazy. We grow cotton, corn, and millet. Sometimes we had ribbon cane, peas. We didn't work too hard. It wasn't bad at that time. We had lots of fun. I went to school up to the ninth grade in Gee's Bend.

I went out to Montgomery and worked at the pie company, I never forget that place. It was me and another girl there. The head lady was enjoying me working so much she let me take care of her kid. I enjoyed that. When I got back home, my mother wanted me to stay because she was getting sick. I wanted to go back, but I never did. But I traveled. I went to Boston, Massachusetts, and Jamaica, New York. I got there on Amtrak, but you can't put me on that anymore. I'm through with that train.

Singing in the White Rose and quilting was the best things I do. Singing I like best of all, because I get joy out of it. Leola Pettway is the secretary. Arlonzia Pettway, a member. Georgianna Pettway, I forget. And I'm the manager. And we're going on pretty good.

My mother, she was quilting. She had four frames at that time. Then you put the quilt up. She makes us quilt the little corner first. Then after we learn good, she let us in the big way, in the front. Then we went on to quilting. We talked to the man, Reverend Walter. When he first came to Boykin, he find me and my auntie Minder Coleman. He say, "The Lord tell me to stop right at this house, here. I want that quilt you quilting." We said we ain't going to get this quilt out today. He said, "I'll take it like it is." So, we get that quilt out. We didn't even hem it. We piece a lot of quilts for him. I enjoyed it very much because I knowing more how to make quilts then. If I hadn't gotten lazy, I could get a piece of cloth and make something out of it. That's the way I do all my things. That's the way I cooked. I don't get no recipe. Whatever way I want to cook, I cook. If it don't be good, I want it that way. I get me a piece of cloth and put it on the bed and decide in my mind the way I want that quilt. When I decide the way I want it, I can make it. You can do things out your head. You ain't got to have a book for everything. See, God can put something in your head and show you how to do it. We can't do nothing without God. He's at the head of everything. We wouldn't even walk this morning if it weren't for God.



CREOLA PETTWAY
William Arnett photograph, 2000

THE WHITE ROSE GOSPEL-SINGING GROUP AT
ITS THIRTY-FIFTH-ANNIVERSARY PERFORMANCE,
PLEASANT GROVE BAPTIST CHURCH
William Arnett photograph, 2000. From left:
Georgianna Pettway, Arlonzia Pettway, Creola
Pettway, Leola Pettway.





CREOLA PETTWAY born 1927
Medallion variation, tied with yarn. 1983.
Nylon blend (tricot). 84 x 69 inches



ESSIE BENDOLPH PETTWAY

A precocious quiltmaker who was artistically mature in her teens, Essie Bendolph Pettway (b. 1956), daughter of Mary Lee Bendolph and granddaughter of Aolar Mosely, is also among the last women in Gee's Bend to continue practicing her craft.

I was looking at my mama sewing back when I was seven, eight—might have been younger—and I was thinking I want to do that for myself. Maybe I was twelve or thirteen when I made my first quilt. I have a family with a lot of peoples quilting—my grandmother, a lot of aunts, my mama—and I picked up a lot from watching them and learning what they was doing.



ESSIE BENDOLPH PETTWAY
David Raccuglia photograph, 2000

I work at American Apparel up in Selma. I do pick-work; I make army coats. Camouflage. I sit at a sewing machine all day. I like doing it, I love my job, but at times it get a little stressful. I come home and sew. But that's different. That is work, this is pleasure. Sewing at home give me peace of mind and a challenge. I make quilts here at home, and pillows, curtains, bedspreads, dresses. I used to make clothes for my two children, Felicia and McDuffy, but I stopped after they got to a certain age and didn't want to wear homemade.

I'm a good worker. Been working hard most of my life. I went to the fields when I was six. Used to pick squash and cucumbers, okras, cotton. Ain't never did no pulling-corn work. After we chopped the cotton, we laid it by for a while, and went to school about a couple of months before going back to the field. It all depend on how we did our work in the field, what time we finished our work, we could go to school pretty regular. I finished twelfth grade, got my diploma.

I get pleasure from my quilts. I enjoy seeing other peoples enjoying my work. I enjoy doing good work. Everything I make got to be right to the point. My son is in the air force. I made him a quilt out of old camouflage material, and he loved it, and the sergeant was persuasive to try to get it from him. I'm happy people appreciate what I do.



ESSIE BENDOLPH PETTWAY born 1956
Multiple blocks and strips. Circa 1970. Cotton, rayon
challis, synthetic linen weave. 68 x 90 inches





ESSIE BENDOLPH PETTWAY born 1956
"Roman Stripes" variation, 1997. Rayon and cotton.
90 x 80 inches

LUCY MINGO

Descending from several generations of quiltmakers, Lucy Mingo (b. 1931) became one of Gee's Bend's leading spokespersons during the civil rights era. Since marrying David Mingo in 1949, she has lived in the area Gee's Benders refer to as "Over the Creek."



LUCY MINGO
David Raccuglia photograph, 2000



ETHEL YOUNG
Unidentified photographer, n.d., courtesy
of Lucy Mingo

I started in the fields when I was six years old with my brother two years older than me. There wasn't nobody but us two. My mother and father were Ethel and Earl Young. My daddy was a longshoreman and worked in Mobile most of the time. He farmed also. I stayed home and worked in the fields till I was thirteen. My mama always depended on me to do most of the cooking. I started when I was seven years old. We went to Boykin elementary and high school—they was together. We lived on Herbert Wilkinson's place. We had to walk four miles to school in the morning and afternoon, and when I get home I'd have to cook for everybody. We had to work very hard, but my father always made the crops for us—cotton, corn, peas, potatoes, peanuts. He had us at home, and we did all the work for him because he was in Mobile. He worked on the riverfront. My daddy give us anything we want. My brother stayed around till he was fourteen and then went to Mobile and worked on the riverfront, too. He been there all his life since.

After I was thirteen, my uncle wanted me to go to Cleveland to go to school, but my mama only let me go to Mobile, to Allen Institute. I graduated from there and turned around and got married when I was seventeen. I moved right back here where I left. My brother didn't want it to happen. He said, "You don't need to go back to the country, you need to go to the city." He said, "You going to be with Mama and Daddy all your life." I really was with them, too. But he wanted me to be with him. He said, "If I live in a plank house, you gonna live in one." He said, "If I live in a brick house, you're going to live in the same thing."

After I got married, I had to go back to the fields, and raised ten children. And I worked there until the civil rights movement came in '65. Then I worked in the school cafeteria for ten years. After then, me and Mrs. Addie Pearl Nicholson, we got laid off. And we said we wasn't going to mess around, so we went to Selma. I worked there a year and then I went to work for the extension service for twenty-three years, and retired when I was sixty-nine. I was a P.A., program assistant. I taught people how to cook, can, and freeze, and I enjoyed every bit of it. I would've worked with the extension service much longer, but my mama got sick.

We had a really good father. He didn't have but five children, and he gave us anything we wanted. He was really good to us. We was brought up on the white man Wilkinson's place. As long as Daddy was vassaling from him, things was kind of rough, but when he stopped and got on his own, things got better. You know, if you live on a white man's place, and he tell you to go over and hoe his place, you do it. We used to go over there and my daddy be crying. He say, "Sister, I'm not going to stay here." So, he go to Mobile as a longshoreman and start on his own. Wilkinson kicked us off in '65. See, he didn't want you to march, but I really wanted to be registered to vote. After Dr. King came down, we marched and went to Camden, and we became registered voters. And then things changed. You could ask for a job when you were a registered voter.

The civil rights, well, it wasn't what I thought it was. Sometimes people said, "Let's go," and when you got there, you didn't know people was going to be active like they was going to be. The first movement I went to was with Nancy Brown in Camden at the gas company. And we got down on our knees, and she began to



[L] OUTSIDE THE COOPERATIVE STORE ON SATURDAY MORNING, GEE'S BEND, ALABAMA
Marion Post Wolcott photograph and title, 1939. Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. Man in wagon is Earl Lee Young. Earl Lee Young was the husband of Ethel Young and the father of Lucy Mingo.

[R] AUNT NELLIE PETTWAY, CARRYING WOOD FROM YARD FOR FIREPLACE. GEE'S BEND, ALABAMA
Marion Post Wolcott photograph and title, 1939. Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. Nellie Pettway was the mother of Ethel Young and the grandmother of Lucy Mingo.



pray. And then I see everybody closing up the stores, and she said, "Don't y'all run and don't y'all move." And I stayed in the movement. But I didn't get in jail. When I see people getting in jail, I stay back because I have children. Civil rights took a long time. It didn't happen overnight. I marched in Montgomery and over the Pettus Bridge, but I wasn't in the one with John Lewis. Some people went to jail, but they didn't let the old people stay in there overnight. My son Eugene, he stay in jail for a week one time. Schoolkids did. Peoples want to become registered voters. That was our main priority. After that, things got better. You could get a good job. Didn't pay much, but it was okay.

Quilting in my family went way back because my mama's mama was a quilter. My mama taught me how to make quilts, but I got my quilting on my own. I could look at things and see how it was done and do it myself. My mother, you know, they go house to house. I think it was ten of them. They quilt four and five quilts a day, helping people. They didn't quilt like we did. They quilt them little bitty rows, about the size of my finger, with that old thread.

My mama's parents were Lee Pettway and Nellie Pettway. But they was Irbys when they get here. But there was this guy came in called Van de Graaff. After he bought the plantation, he got them to change their name to Pettway. My parents' people was from Orrville, Alabama, up the road a few miles. But I never knew Orrville. My sister got children there I don't even know. And you didn't call this Boykin then, you called it Primrose. And Mama and them, they was living down in Primrose. It was Gee's Bend before then. Where I was born, you called it Rehoboth. I met my husband in 1949. I knew him before that because we didn't live down the road too far from each other. He farmed and worked on bridges. He's done a little of everything. He worked in Mobile some. David is his name. I had seven girls, three boys, and raised two grandchildren.



LUCY MINGO born 1931
"Housetop"—"Log Cabin" variation.
Circa 1985. Cotton and cotton/polyester
blend. 97 x 85 inches

LUCY T. PETTWAY

Raised and trained by several of Gee's Bend's most serious quiltmakers, Lucy T. Pettway (b. 1921), known as "Lunky," made quilts for seven decades. She has been more curious than most of her peers about patterns that originate outside the area, which she collects and transforms.

I was a farmer. I'm the fourth of fourteen children of Mary Ann and Tom O. Pettway. I was born in 1921. We farmed cotton, corn, peanuts, sugarcane, peas, millet—called it sorghum in them days. I plowed mules and steers. If my father was gone, I plowed in his place. Most of the time girls wasn't let to plow. We went to school in the old church back then. We didn't go to school until the last of November. Come out of school last part of March, had to knock cotton stalks, cut bushes, clear up new ground, get ready to break the land and plant. When my daddy got a tractor, I didn't have to plow no more. I had one kid already by then. I was twenty years. I stopped school at that time but was just in fifth grade. They had ones in the fifth grade older than I was, even.

I farmed right up to when they put the water down. They built a dam down at Miller's Ferry and that flooded out the land between here and our farmland—we had a piece about ten acres on the hill by the river. We quit farming it then. After that, I just farmed a little around the house. I had lot more time then to piece up quilts and quilt them. I always had taken me some quilt pieces in the fields when I was working there, and when I knock off work at twelve to eat, I make me a block or so till I go back to the fields. When



LUCY T. PETTWAY
Unidentified photographer, early 1940s, courtesy
of Lucy T. Pettway

LUCY T. PETTWAY born 1921
"Drunkard's Path"—four-block variation (quiltmaker's
name: "Devil's Walking Stick"). Circa 1945. Cotton.
78 x 78 inches. This quilt and the one illustrated on the
opposite page are personal variations on the "Drunkard's
Path" pattern, created twenty-five years apart.



the field days ended, I went to making quilts most all the time when I wasn't sewing and making clothes for my children to wear.

I started piecing quilts when I was probably about twelve. I loved to sew. I watched my mama, and got me some cloth, and went to piecing. The first quilt I ever made was a "Lazy Gal." I was thirteen. Then a "Nine Patch." Then I went to string quilts, just sewing pieces together. Old clothes we didn't wear no more, that's what we made them out of then.

My aunt Lucy, my grandmother's sister, she was working for the white people across the river in Camden. She give us a book the white people gave her with quilt patterns in it. My mother made some quilts after the book patterns, and I do the same sometime—"Stars," "Monkey Wrench," that's about it. I mostly made string quilts. I get me my ideas different kind of ways. I used to pass by quilts out on a line, get me a piece of paper and draw a pattern from it, make me my quilt. Mama was one to show me a lot. Mama make a "Snowball," I make me one. I used to go to Martha Jane's house, my mama's sister, help her quilt. My aunt Arie, my daddy's baby sister, she make any kind of quilts. She nursed me when I was a baby. I loved her. I been piecing quilt tops right up to about last year. I can't quilt them no more. My head be swimming, like turning around, from high blood pressure. I went to the hospital in 1985 with this thing, found out what caused it. They say "high blood pressure" but they ain't done nothing about it. I'd love to go back to quilts. I love to quilt. I love to piece on them. I love to wash them. I love to look at pretty quilts. I got to make me another one.



LUCY T. PETTWAY
David Raccuglia photograph, 2000



LUCY T. PETTWAY born 1921
"Drunkard's Path" variation in medallion format. Circa 1970.
Cotton and cotton/polyester blend. 85 x 81 inches



A BRANCH OF THE MOSELY-BENDOLPH-PETTWAY FAMILY

Mary Lee Bendolph (b. 1935) is one of Gee's Bend's community memory keepers. In 1999 she was the subject of "Crossing Over," the *Los Angeles Times's* Pulitzer Prize-winning article about the effort to reestablish ferry service across the Alabama River.

Families down here, they like to do together. See, we farm together, and the ladies in the family get together for quilting. In them days, they farm three months, then when the lay-by time come—'round the last of May, June—they go to piecing quilts. August, go back to the field. October and November, up into December—and then after Christmas and New Year over with—back to piecing and quilting. Piece by yourself; quilt together.

When you go to quilt, you beat the cotton out on the floor, first thing, to get the dust out. Then sweep the floor—collect the cotton—spread the lining out and put the cotton back on the lining, beat it out, put the top on there, get your thread and needles and hook it in the quilting frame.

Most of the families down here did the same thing—piece by themselves and come together to quilt. On my side, my family, we go fast, don't follow no patterns so close. Other families take more time, do slow work. They don't get out in the road much like us did. We just try to put it together and get it through with. We don't try to style it or nothing. Folks call some of this kind of stuff "crazy quilts"—don't know which-a-way it going. I never did go by a pattern. Didn't none us. I mostly take after my aunt Louella, but I never make a quilt altogether like anybody. I watched Mama back when she could work, but she was slow and careful more than me.



MOSELY FAMILY: (CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM) AOLAR MOSELY, MARY LEE MOSELY BENDOLPH, RUTH P. MOSELY, LILLIE MAE MOSELY PETTWAY, RAYMOND MOSELY
Unidentified photographer, n.d., courtesy of Mary Lee Bendolph



AOLAR MOSELY 1912-1999
"Housetop"—"Half-Log Cabin" variation.
Circa 1950. Cotton clothing and unbleached muslin sacking. 75 × 75 inches





LILLIE MAE PETTWAY 1927-1990
"Housetop"—twelve-block "Half-Log Cabin" variation.
Circa 1965. Cotton, wool, corduroy. 77 x 65 inches



We got a big family spread out down here making quilts: Mama and her sister Louella Pettway; Mama's sister Virginia, her daughter Linda Pettway, and Linda's daughters, Lucy Witherspoon and Gloria Hoppins; my mother-in-law, Indiana Bendolph Pettway. My sister Lillie Mae, she made real pretty quilts before she passed. Mama's first cousin Deborah Young could make beautiful quilts, and her daughter Arcola. My daughter, Essie, always been doing good work since she was little. She a very strong-minded person. Determination. She like to make things like I make, but she look at it and go home and do it better.

My daddy was Wisdom Mosely and my mama was Aolar Mosely. She was good at healing peoples. She was a lovely, caring person. She go down in the woods and pick some stuff—I missed out on that part, can't do none of that—and mix it up and give it to us, make us well. Only time we go to the doctor was with toothache—she couldn't pull teeth—or if something was broke. She couldn't do that.

My mother rubbed a lot of people and stopped they hurting. She always would be there for you. I don't

care who need her. She say the Lord tell you to give. The more you give, the more you get. She say you got to always say you have it even if you didn't have it. Don't ever say you ain't got something. If folks think you ain't got nothing, you can't get nothing from them. If they think you got it, they give you some more.

Back then mamas didn't never tell they children about having babies. If she told me, I about wouldn't have had them. We didn't know nothing about how it happen. We just think the mid-doctor come and give the baby to the parents. Mama would go to the doctor and come back with a baby. We think the doctor had give it to her.

One day, I got ready to go to school and Mama wouldn't let me go. I ask her why I couldn't go. She say, "You don't want to go." I kept asking her why I don't go. She say, "You big." That meant I was with a baby. I cried and prayed all day for the Lord to take it away from me, but he didn't. Nothing but made me big and fat. The first time I had sex, my period came along. The next time I had sex, I got pregnant. I learnt the



MARY LEE BENDOLPH
David Raccuglia photograph, 2000

hard way.

I got to the sixth grade. When I got pregnant I had to quit. Mama knew the school wouldn't take you when you pregnant. They made you quit, and after you had the baby you couldn't go back to school. Soon as the school see you pregnant, you had to go home and stay. They say it was against the law for a lady to go to school and be pregnant, 'cause that influence the other children to get pregnant. Soon as you have a baby, you couldn't never go to the school again.

When Essie—she my only daughter—when she turn fourteen, I sat down and talk with her and the boys, the three that was older than Essie, and Beaver, he was right under her. And I told them I prayed to the Lord that he could let me know things so I can tell them, so they wouldn't go and grow up as stupid as I did. Some people not a breeding woman, but I was one. I was a fast breeder. I was little, but I got grown 'fore time. I got a baby when I didn't need him. Dropped out of school. Fourteen years old. Didn't even finish the middle school. Just moved through life too fast. Even now I could sit down and relax, but I still moving too fast.

I prayed a whole lot during that time for the Lord to help show me. One night in my rest, I had this big dream the airplane and the helicopter was riding over our head—a lot of people on the ground—and when they lit down, peoples started to running—but I didn't run. Some white peoples and colored peoples, all mixed together, got off the plane and looked like they was having a meeting. I woke up and that dream wouldn't get off my mind. I told Mama, "Something coming here to this place."

I kept dreaming that dream about a helicopter—I always tell Mama 'cause she was good at telling me what the dreams mean, and she'd tell me to keep on praying, and the Lord will tell me things. And what I dreamed come to pass: Martin Luther King came to that big old church here in Gee's Bend, up on the hill, Pleasant Grove Baptist Church. He stood up and talked. I didn't miss nothing.

And when he went to Camden, I had to beg my husband to let me go—but I went. We rode on Monroe Pettway's truck, Bootnie's husband. I was in the group with Martin Luther King when he went up to drink the "white" water. He wanted us to know that the water wasn't no different and to let the white people know





MARY LEE BENDOLPH born 1935

"Housetop" variation. 1998; quilted by her daughter, Essie Bendolph Pettway, in 2001. Cotton, corduroy, twill, assorted polyesters. 72 x 76 inches. In the early 1990s a former Bend resident living in Bridgeport, Connecticut, sent some garments—double-knit leisure suits—to Gee's Bend. Mary Lee Bendolph remembers: "My sister-in-law's daughter sent those clothes down here and told me to give them away, but didn't nobody want them. That knit stuff, clothes from way back yonder, don't nobody wear no more, and the pants was all bell-bottom. We ain't that out-of-style down here. I was going to take them to the Salvation Army but didn't have no way to get there, so I just made quilts out of them."



that we could all drink the same water. So, I went up to drink me some of it, and Lillie Mae, my oldest sister, caught hold to my coat. I put my arms back behind me and let that coat be pulled right off. I was on my way to that fountain to drink. I was going to drink the white water. I got to it, but she pulled me away, so I didn't get none of the white water that day. She thought they was going to hurt me. She was supposed to take care of me. She was so humble and sweet. I was the bad guy in the family. I always could be more straight out, didn't like holding back nothing. When I finally did get to drink that white water, it wasn't no different. I wondered what all the fussing was about. I couldn't see why they wanted to keep us from that water, unless they just thought we was dirty.

We have a good community. I thank the Lord for the peoples here. We hardly have a killing here. You don't have to worry about locking up things. When I first married and I locked up the doors, my husband say, "We don't have to lock up things here." We left the key in the truck all the time. Ain't nobody bothered it, year after year. I'm satisfied right here where I'm at. I'll go visit some place. But to live there? No.

I don't know enough to live in a city. I can't hear good enough to live in a city. Cars go too fast in a city. When I went to Connecticut, they was pretty good in the part I was in, but they don't do for each other. My son and I watched this white man trying to move a big old rock, and he had done dig around it until noon, and I told my son, "Go help that white man." And he say, "I ain't going nowhere help that man. Mama, you don't help nobody here; you ain't in the country." I went out there and say to the white man, "You want me to move that block?" And he say, "Naw, I can't let you do that." So I say, "You want me to show you how?" And he say, "How you know about that?" And I say, "My mama taught me."



MARY LEE BENDOLPH born 1935
"Basket Weave" variation. Circa 1990. Cotton,
polyester, corduroy. 75 x 84 inches



MARY L. BENNETT

A granddaughter of Delia Bennett (1892–1976), ancestor of many quiltmakers in Gee’s Bend, Mary L. Bennett (b. 1942) pieces primarily “Housetop” and “Bricklayer” compositions and imaginative variations of them.

I was born down here in Brown Quarters in 1942 and got raised by my grandmother Delia Bennett. My mother was Lucille, Reverend Bennett’s sister. Daddy was Finest Major.

I started out working in the fields—I ought to been about ten or eleven—hoeing, picking cotton, pulling corn, stripping millet, digging sweet potatoes, picking squashes and cucumbers, and putting them in the crocus sacks for my uncle Stalling Bennett, my grandmother’s son. He taken all that to sell up to the main canning factory up in Uniontown. I didn’t get no schooling—every now and then a day here and there. After my granddaddy and them died, we didn’t do no more farming. I ain’t did much since then. I still live over in Brown.

Didn’t nobody teach me to make quilts. I just learned it by myself, about twelve or thirteen. I was seeing my grandmama piecing it up, and then I start. I just taken me some pieces and put it together, piece them up till they look like I want them to look. That’s all.



MARY L. BENNETT
William Arnett photograph, 2000



MARY L. BENNETT born 1942
“Housetop”—nine-block variation. Circa 1975. Cotton, denim, cotton/polyester blend, cotton knit. 87 × 77 inches





MARY L. BENNETT born 1942
"Housetop" variation. Circa 1965. Cotton and
cotton/polyester blend. 77 x 82 inches



QUNNIE PETTWAY

A longtime worker at the Freedom Quilting Bee, Quennie Pettway (b. 1943) enjoyed bringing home ornate fabric scraps from the bee and making improvisational versions of traditional patterns.

My mama, Candis Pettway, learned me how to quilt. We made "Housetops" and quilted them in rows. After I got married, 1960, I started making pattern quilts. My sister learned me how to piece the "Wedding Ring." Then I learned to piece a "Chestnut Bud" at Mattie Ross house. Later on I learned to piece the "Bear Paw," "Grandmama's Dream," "Grandmama's Choice" up to Mrs. Witherspoon's. For myself, I like to piece a "Crazy Z" quilt and strip quilts with the corduroy from the Freedom Quilting Bee. I made eight-point "Star" quilts for other people. When my health went to failing, I stick with simple quilts.

Most thing I did was learn to cook and make quilts. Now, when I was a real young girl I liked to play jacks, jump rope, and hopscotch. I been to the doctor lately. I'm going blind in one eye. I suffer from the diabetes.



QUNNIE PETTWAY
David Raccuglia photograph, 2000



QUNNIE PETTWAY born 1943
"Chinese Coins." 1983. Cotton and cotton/
polyester blend. 90 x 70 inches





QUNNIE PETTWAY born 1943
"Z." Circa 1970. Cotton, cotton/polyester blend,
wool. 98 x 89 inches

RITA MAE PETTWAY

Raised by her grandmother, quiltmaker Annie E. Pettway, Rita Mae Pettway (b. 1941) is one of the few women in Gee's Bend who still occasionally make quilts.

They been calling me "Rabbit" ever since I was a little girl. They say that when I started walking I started running, so I got that nickname. When I was coming up, I had three aunties, and we all lived there in one room together. Ella, Nellie Mae, and Mary Lisa. They were Ed O. and Annie E. Pettway children, and I was raised up with them like they was my sisters. I was four years old when my mama passed. The only thing they told me was she got killed. Her name was Louisiana. I was raised up by my mama's parents. My uncle Willie Quill lived with us, too, like a brother. We was all born right next to here in one of those



RITA MAE PETTWAY
David Raccuglia photograph, 2000

old plank houses with the windows you just push it out like a door. My granddaddy built another house for us right here some time in the '40s, and I'm still living in that house.

I learnt all of what I know from growing up watching my grandmother. I watched her cook, had to learn to wash on a rub board, learn to use a smoothing iron. Started in the fields when I was seven years old. Hoed cotton, chopped cotton, picked cotton. It was the only kind of work I had to do, and I loved to do it. It didn't bother me none. I would pick two-hundred-and-something pounds of cotton every day. I felt pretty good at the end of the day. I still had to come back and clean up and cook—whatever part I didn't finish when I went in the field in the morning. On Sundays we went to church first thing in the morning. The church they had us going to was over in Buddy Clarence Pettway's pasture. It was an old plank church built just like the houses, same kind of windows. All my friends used to get together right out here after church. We was writing stuff, or making mud cakes, jump rope, had a plank we jumped on like a seesaw. Onliest thing we did after everything else

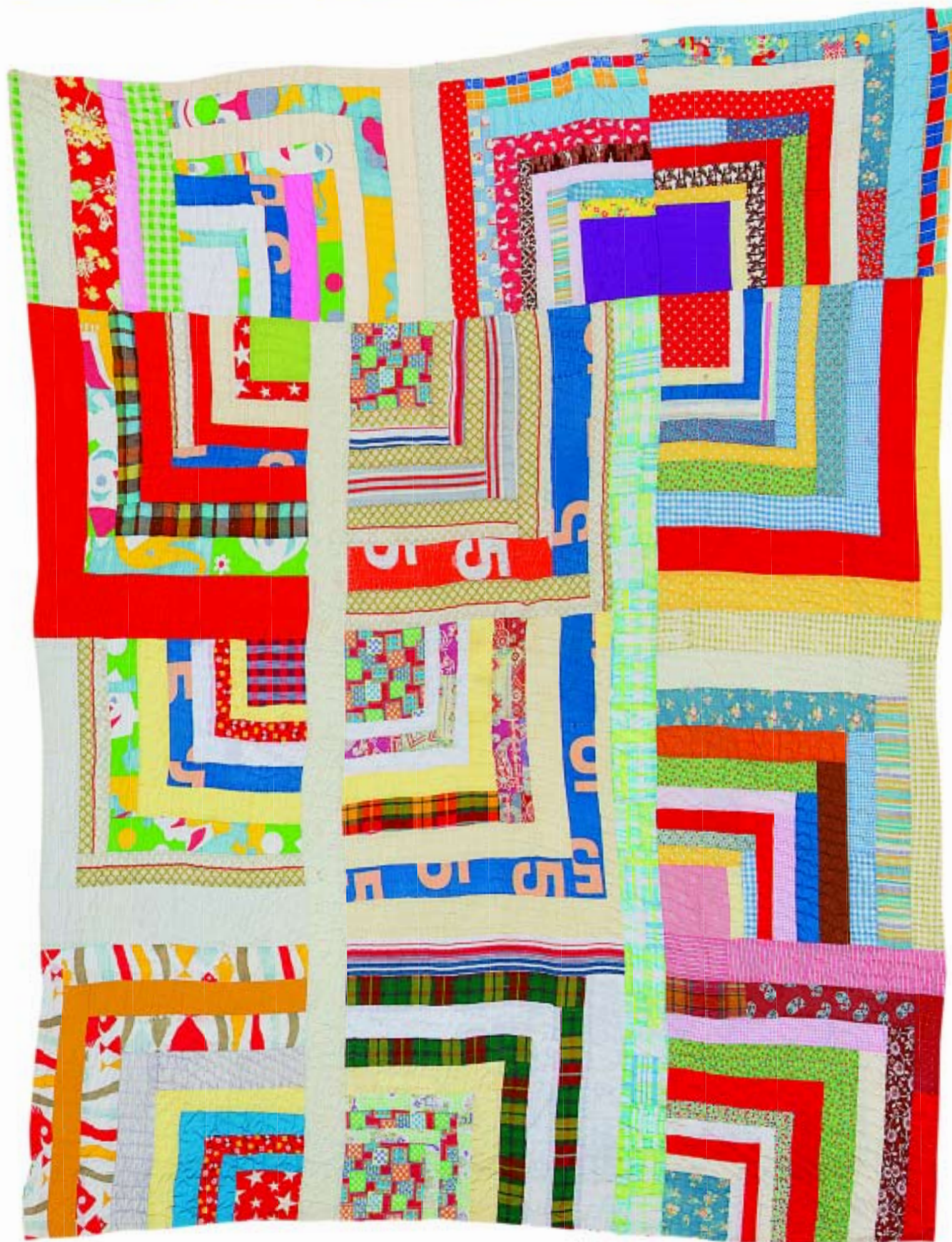
was done, we sit by the fireplace in the wintertime and piece up quilts. Me and my grandmama Annie. She didn't have no pattern to go by; she just cut them by the way she know how to make them. We did it by a kerosene lamp.

The way we used to quilt them, it ain't the way we do it now. I have horses now, but we had the frame; we had four frames, one on each side of the room; tied it up to the rafters. When we got ready to use the frames, we untied them and eased them down to the level we going to sit down to quilt at. When you done for the day, you hash it back up to the rafters. Nellie and Mary Lisa, they quilted with us, too, right in the same room. Piecing them up, you do that by yourself; but quilting, we all did it together. The first quilt I made on my own, I was fourteen. It was a "Nine Patch" quilt. I been kept making quilts ever since then.

I graduated from high school when I was nineteen. I couldn't go to school that regular 'cause I had to work in the field. We went on days when it rained.

I take care of grandchildren and cows now, and that's about it. I work in my garden. I feel good about living where I live and about putting my children through school, hard as that was, living on a farm. Without welfare we couldn't have got by, but we made it. I am happy the way it is. It's been a pretty good life.





RITA MAE PETTWAY born 1941
"Housetop"—twelve-block "Half-Log Cabin" variation. Circa 1975.
Cotton, cotton/polyester blend, corduroy. 84 x 70 inches



RUTH P. MOSELY

One of three quilting daughters of Mary Ann Bendolph Pettway and Tom O. Pettway (the others being Lucy T. "Lunky" Pettway and Revil Mosely), Ruth (b. 1928) grew up in the Sodom neighborhood, moving to Pettway when she married Wisdom Mosely Jr.



RUTH P. MOSELY
William Arnett photograph, 1999

My mother taught me how to quilt. I used to make my dolls' clothes. People didn't have too much material then. And so whatever you found to sew with, if it wasn't nothing but a flour sack, you sew that together. The first quilt I ever made, Mama left some strips there, and some of the pieces were an inch wide, and I just took those little strings and watched her. I sewed one just like she was sewing hers. And that's the way I learned how to quilt, from her scraps. Sometimes I cut the pattern I want and I built it just like a "Housetop." Just like folks put shingles on a house, that's the way I have it lined up. I enjoyed it. My daddy used to go to Camden and he would get all the material he could and bring home for Mama to make quilts where we could keep warm in the winter.



MARY ANN PETTWAY
Unidentified photographer, n.d.,
courtesy of Tom Pettway

My oldest sister and next-oldest sister, they had babies. Back in that time, if you have a baby you just don't go back to school. Stay home and tend to that baby. I told myself, "Lunky and them might get a baby, but I ain't getting one till I get out of school and get ready to marry." That's what I told myself, and that's what happened. My mama would tend to my baby. She told me, "If you get another one, I ain't going to have nothing to do with it. You go out and get him, you going to worry about him."

We didn't know what a new dress was. We would go to the place where the peoples had clothes someone else wore, and we would wear that. And we used to make clothes in school. And I help those other children

cut out their clothes, and the teacher caught me doing it. She said, "I'm not going to give you a grade; I'm going to give them a grade, because you doing yours and theirs too." I said, "It don't make a difference to me." She said, "Are you talking back?" And I said, "No. You know I'm not going to do that because Papa and Mama both will beat me. I'm just telling you the straight truth."

I had three boys and three girls. That's enough. I taught school for twenty-four years. The kids were in the third and fourth and fifth grade. They was all mixed up then.

They moved the school. We had to go to school in Camden. We had to go around that road through Alberta. Or on that skiff across the river. The man that was carrying us across the river was standing up in the skiff and I was sitting in the boat with my hands on both sides holding like I don't know what. And water started coming in there. And I said, "The next time I come to Camden, I'm going all the way through Alberta." That water was coming on up in there.

My mama died kind of early, so I would go over to Aunt Arie's house sometimes. She would make all kinds of quilts. She would give me one block. She would say, "When you come back up here, you better have more than one block made." And so I did.

Back in that time, children would obey grown people. They don't now. And some of 'em tell you. "I ain't studying about you. You ain't my mama." But in my yard you belong to me.



MARY ANN PETTWAY 1900-1953
Sixteen-block "Monkey Wrench" variation. 1949. Cotton, corduroy,
wool. 78 x 76 inches. Mary Ann Pettway and her daughter Ruth
used the same materials in the quilts on these two pages.

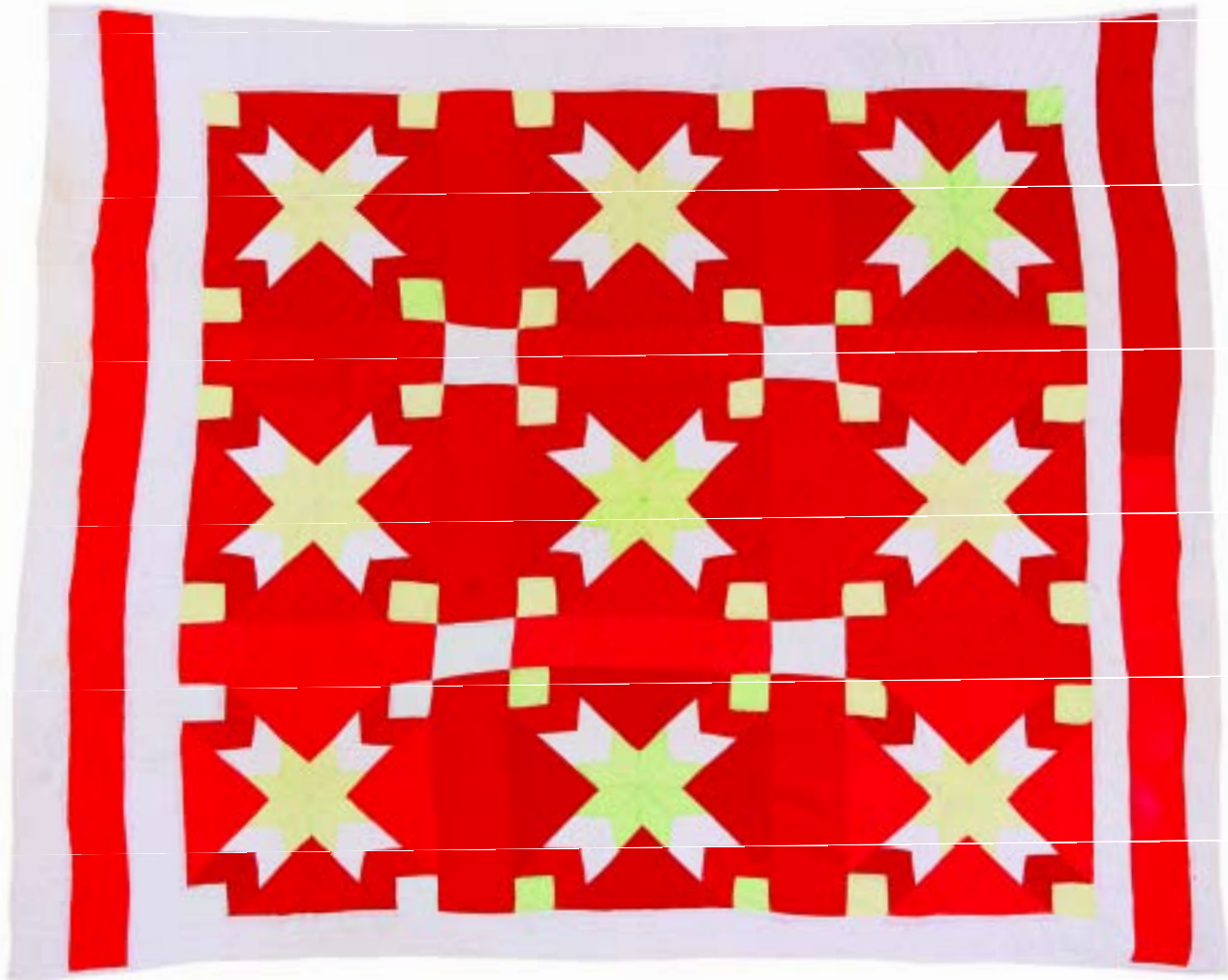


RUTH P. MOSELY born 1928
"Nine Patch" variation. 1949. Cotton. 72 x 76 inches



RUTH P. MOSELY born 1928
"Housetop" medallion checkerboard with "Monkey
Wrench" blocks. 1949. Cotton, sacking, corduroy,
silk, wool, rayon. 75 x 81 inches





RUTH P. MOSELY born 1928
 "Star" (eight-point star within a four-point star)—
 nine-block variation. 1963. Cotton. 78 × 87 inches



RUTH P. MOSELY born 1928
 "Dutchman's Puzzle"—twenty-block "Pinwheel" variation.
 Circa 1945. Cotton, sacking material, nylon knit, backed
 with sacking material. 72 × 93 inches





RUTH P. MOSELY born 1928
Strips. Circa 1955. Cotton. 89 x 75 inches

