

Photos by Milan Chvostek

Huge quilt auction has St. Jacobs in stitches

By Isobel Warren

Myrtle Horst is 87 years old and has raised more than \$40,000 for Mennonite Relief since she made her first, exquisite quilt nearly 20 years ago.

Her 2008 quilt is stunning - a huge garland of pink roses, six shades of pink for the blossoms, six more for the foliage, embroidered in tiny cross-stitches - all this despite two cataract operations and a touch of arthritis in the hands.

And she's already embarked on her 2009 quilts - two of them. "As long as the Lord keeps giving me good eyes and good hands, I'll keep doing this work," she says.

Horst's work, along with many others, will be featured in the Mennonite Relief auction May 31 - part of a long list of quilting events that week.

"Quilting is the thread that helps to bind our community together," explains St. Jacobs volunteer Lynn Wolf.

Quaint St. Jacobs in Waterloo County's Mennonite country is often called the 'Quilt Capital of Canada.'

"You'll find quilts everywhere," commented Wolf. "Before the auction, they're displayed at the Mennonite church, the mill and silo on the main street, the Century Schoolhouse and the Church Theatre." Juggling a busy project management job, Wolf volunteers at the auction and chairs the St. Jacobs quilt shows committee, which oversees local shows.

Quilting is a year-round activity. "Hundreds of women piecing, appliqueing, embroidering, stitching, binding," Wolf says. "They often sew the tops at home, then join groups of women at their church to finish the quilts. And over 200 quilts, many of them truly works of art, are



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Myrtle Horst's cross-stitched quilts have already brought some \$40,000 at auction. Her garland of roses was a year in the making.

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Stitching in the sunshine, Mennonite women work together to complete some 200 quilts for the Mennonite Relief Auction.

donated to the auction. These women are heroes but they never take a bow.”

Up at the Mennonite Church, those heroes are hard at work. The sunny activity room is packed with quilting frames and flying needles as teams of stitchers create 'sandwiches' of top, batting and backing, basting, pinning and securing them to quilting frames, hand stitching the entire piece, binding the edges and . . . tackling the next one. Dresden plates and Texas stars, log cabins and double wedding rings and many more fanciful designs emerge from their deft hands. An unusual variation is candlewicking tiny knots of thread, traditionally actual candlewick string, connected by fine hand stitching, defining a complex quilt pattern.

Of course, there's more to St. Jacobs than quilts. Reduced to near ghost town status by 1970, thanks to the lure of shopping centres, it emerged as a unique tourist haven, propelled by the energy and vision of entrepreneur Milo Shantz and a committee of local business people.

These days about 1.5 million people visit annually. The main street is lined with artisans and art galleries, antique stores and the mill and silo, which houses an antique hardware store, a vast model railway set-up, an electricity exhibit, an art gallery and a craft shop. With sophisticated photos and videos, the Mennonite Centre traces the history of Old Order Mennonites, driven from their European homes to havens around the world. The Farmer's Market draws some 40,000 visitors a week. There's live theatre, an outlet mall, a traditional Mennonite furniture builder, excellent accommodations and restaurants.

And quilts! Quilt shows, quilt sales, quilt auctions, quilt supply shops. Quilting and charity are time-honoured traditions in the Mennonite community encircling St. Jacobs.

That's where the Mennonite Central Committee enters the picture. Formed in 1920 to allay starvation in the Ukraine, the MCC now reaches out worldwide to victims of natural disasters, wars or poverty, regardless of race or religion. And quilts, hand stitched by volunteers and sold at auction, are a primary fund raiser. In the 41-year lifespan of the New Hamburg sale, contributions to the MCC have totalled nearly \$13.5 million. Last year's feature quilt, “Birds in the



Close-up of star quilt stitching

"Air", made by Blossom Zink and quilted by the women of First Mennonite Church, Kitchener, earned \$5,200.

Auction quilts are displayed in various venues, including the St. Jacobs Mennonite Church and Kitchener City Hall, prior to the May 31 sale.

Outstanding design and workmanship are spotlighted at the quilt gallery in the rejuvenated old mill and silo. On May 28, the Church Theatre trunk show displays quilts incorporating printed feed bags, the specialty of two remarkable artists, Nina Stahlschmidt and Marion Holman. The Schoolhouse Theatre, near the mill, offers tea, treats and 'A Sampling' various design styles and stories by local artists. The annual quilt block challenge, a competition to produce a themed block, called for 'baskets galore' this year. After judging, the blocks are assembled into a quilt top and donated to the auction. They've raised over \$37,000 for the MCC since 1996.

At the New Hamburg arena, just down Highway 8 toward Stratford, quilts are previewed the evening before the sale. Bidding begins at 8:30 a.m. on May 31, continuing to late afternoon. The event is free and the arena is always packed. Outside, the action spills across the fairgrounds with craft, plant and flower sales, children's activities, a quilting supplies booth and an auction of antique tractors.

And food hearty home-made Mennonite fare such as Russian fleish piroshki, rollkuchen and vereneki, Swiss tea balls, apple fritters and cream buns, Hispanic pupusas and Laotian spring rolls plus local delicacies that have become auction day staples -- sausage or herring on a bun, homemade ice cream, apple butter and sweet cider and a whole tent full of fruit pies, especially fresh strawberry.

Back at the church, the stitchery continues as teams construct heavy-duty comforters for victims of natural disasters and wars. Instead of quilting, the three layers are knotted together with sturdy yarn. "We were really knotty last year," chuckles organizer Mary Metzger. Her group whipped up 121 comforters destined for Iran, Afghanistan and South America. "A comforter means warmth, both physical and spiritual," she comments. "There's never an end to needing them. So we women are happy to be doing our little part for peace and good in the world."

Quilts Carry On

Stratford: The Quilt, A Breast Cancer Support Project, now in its 10th year, stages exhibitions, auctions and 'quilting



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Mary Metzger supervises the work on sturdy comforters, knotted, rather than quilted and turned out by the dozens for disaster victims.

marathons', across Canada. Founded by Carol Miller, a breast cancer survivor, The Quilt has raised over \$1.5 million to fund programs that provide emotional and physical support for breast cancer survivors and their families. This year's events include quilt auctions in Halifax, Ottawa, Stratford, Toronto, Calgary, Kamloops and Victoria and a major quilt show in Stratford, July 1 to October 31. Details: www.thequilt.com or 1-866-578-8553.

Kitchener: The Joseph Schneider Haus in Kitchener, one of Ontario's oldest homesteads, joins with the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery to host an ambitious annual 'Grand National' quilt show at the gallery, May 9 to July 7. This year's theme Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow has elicited 80 entries ranging from traditional to highly innovative. Info: 519-579-5860 or www.grandnationalquiltshow.ca or www.kwag.on.ca

Cambridge: McDougall Cottage, built in 1858, offers a show of 'wee quilts' -- no larger than two feet square. Themed 'Scotland Rocks', this year's event continues until Labour Day. Info: 519-624-8250.

Cambridge: Quilts Galore May 28 to 31 exhibits a range of textile beauties plus a unique 'wooden quilt'. David Durward Centre. Info: 519-740-4630.

Getting there:

St. Jacobs is just north of Waterloo on Highway 8. The Mennonite Relief Sale and Auction takes place at the New Hamburg Arena and Fairgrounds, Hwy. 7 & 8, west of Kitchener. Preview Friday evening, May 30. Reserved seats: \$10. Pancake breakfast Sat., 7 a.m. Sale May 31, 8:30 to late afternoon. Details: www.nhmrs.com or 1-800-313-6226.

St. Jacobs Quilt Shows:
www.stjacobs.com/html/St.JacobsQuiltShows.html

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Quilters happily tackle a huge 'double wedding ring' quilt in the upstairs loft of the Quilted Heirloom Shop, which supplies quilting fabrics, supplies and finished quilts.