

Saved by the Pin

*by Sheila Johnson*

My maternal Grandmother Edna is credited for making the most beautiful heirloom quilts in our family's known lineage. A seamstress as well, she would save every piece of scrap material from her original wardrobe designs and uniquely use them to make quilts for those she loved. As a child, I would marvel at the patience, perfection, and love that she generously poured into every master quilt.

Mama, as we called our grandmother, taught me that every fabric square should be cut exactly the same size and sewn together with perfectly even seams and stitches. In those days, all of her quilts were hand stitched and would last for decades to come because hand stitching allowed her to use heavier cottons and thicker cotton thread. After all the squares were sewn together in her fashion, Mama would carefully measure the finished top and cut an equally sized single piece of fabric for the bottom to be sewn together with cotton or wool batting in between the two. But before these three layers were actually melded together with her gifted needlework, Mama would insert a large silver safety pin through the corner of each square that would keep the fabrics from moving too much while she stitched. From my view as a little one looking up at this huge work of art, the smooth, flat, cotton cover quickly transformed into a shiny sea of glitter. I never imagined that I, too, would one-day delight in swimming in this body of joy.

As I grew older, Mama told me stories about *her* grandmother's quilts and how each square represented an African or Native American tribe. The fabrics were woven stories of our peoples' struggles and victories through slavery and genocide. Depending upon the pattern, some quilts were used as directives to safe and trusted passages to freedom. Others were sold at open and underground market places for handsome prices. The money was used to buy transport, food, clothing, and freedom for slaves who chose to use the Underground Railroad. Mama said the safety pins that temporarily held the layers together would be removed only after the stitching had been completed on each respective square. Using safety pins was our way of keeping the village secure until the stitching together of a nation was done. The finished quilt provided warmth, covering, safety, and a feeling of community.

Who could have guessed that the invention of an American mechanic by the name of Walter Hunt in 1849 would be used to hold together broken pieces of history until they were bound together by weavers of wisdom, strength, and courage? I believe that the naming of the "safety" pin was Spirit-led and that all of us are a part of one great tapestry designed by One Great Artist.