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The 1943 friendship quilt, the blocks made by ladies in the Women's Guild of St. John's Evangelical Church in Western and assembled by Maechelle (Oldfield) Clements, is finally completed.

The quilt that brought a small community back together

By: Ben Lampman

UNL Intern

The Western community felt the loss of JoAnn (Drake) Roesler. Her sister, Rhonda (Drake) Drewes, remembers her dedication to the town, displaying her pride in the community at every opportunity.

"She loved Western. She collected a lot of Western stuff," Drewes said. "She just took pride in displaying things, loved it."

Roesler cared about her community. She was known for collecting various pieces of memorabilia, including a Western sign on an antique pole from her father's gas station.

"In fact, she brought in an antique pole that was at her father-in-law's gas station, and she had a sign made that said 'Old Main Street'," Drewes said. "Which was actually the first main street in Western."

When Roesler found an assortment of 22 quilt blocks at an auction, she purchased them with the goal of preserving Western history by sewing them into a quilt representing the community.

Unfortunately, JoAnn died in 2020, the blocks remaining in a box in her home.

"After she passed away, her daughters didn't know what to do with her stuff," Drewes said. "They were just throwing stuff on the table, and they had a box that had a Walmart sack."

Drewes said she remembers seeing the box at a garage sale her daughters put on, unaware of the value of the blocks.

"I looked in there, and I thought 'My gosh, those are quilt blocks,'" she said.

Drewes was not sure where the blocks came from, or why they came into her sister's possession, but she knew she couldn't see them sold.

"I can't let those girls just sell those blocks," she said.

After Roesler's daughters gave Drewes the blocks, she set out to find their origin.

“We thought she got them when the Methodist church in Western closed down, but after we got to looking at these blocks, they were all ladies that went to Saint John’s Church,” she said. “They couldn’t figure it out.”

Even without knowing the history, Drewes said she was determined to finish the quilt to honor her sister’s dedication to preservation.

She and her siblings enlisted the help of her cousin, Maechelle “Mickie” Clements, daughter of Dorothy (Drake) Oldfield, who had experience putting quilts together.

“My cousin Mickie who is doing the quilt, she was very close to my sister JoAnn,” Drewes said. “She didn’t hesitate at all.”

As she worked, Clements became curious about the history of the quilt, though Drewes herself was unsure.

“She started asking about the history of it, and well, we didn’t know,” Drewes said.

To find answers, Drewes and her siblings posted on the Western Facebook group, and received responses from family members and local community members who had any insight on the origin of the blocks.

Darlene Musso, who according to Drewes is “probably one of the oldest people in Western yet,” was able to identify the blocks as made in 1943 by ladies in the Women’s Guild of St. John’s Evangelical Church in Western.

Drewes and her siblings were confronted by another problem, however. The ladies, who had embroidered their names on the quilt blocks, did not use their first names.

“Those names, back then, they never went by who they really were,” she said. “They always went by ‘Mrs. Jerry Smith’ or ‘Mrs. Emmel Henk’. They didn’t go by ‘Velma Smith’,” she said.

Drewes said she and her siblings began the process of finding the identities of each block maker.

“Doing the research on this, we found out the first names of all of these ladies,” she said.

Drewes said she wasn’t sure what she was going to do with the quilt, but she knew her sister and the families of the ladies involved would want to see it completed.

“I was going to sell it, raffle it, or auction it off,” she said. “I just knew I was going to do something with it.”

Once Clements finished the quilt, Drewes said she was overjoyed with how it came out.

“It turned out absolutely beautiful,” Drewes said.

The quilt, now complete, is set to be auctioned at Western’s 150th celebration, at the quilt show on Saturday, July 16. Drewes said her goal is to see the quilt bring together some of the families of the original ladies, to share stories and reunite over the shared history.

“I am hoping that some of these families will come forward and we can get together,” she said.

Drewes said her goal is for the quilt to go to a family member of one of the ladies, or someone with a strong connection to the quilt or Western.

She said while showing the quilt to Western alumni, one alumna recognized the names of various family members and women she knew on the quilt.

“I heard afterwards, she said she’s hoping to get enough money together to buy it,” Drewes said, “I’d like to see somebody like that have it.”

Ultimately, Drewes said she is happy with how the situation turned out, and the work was a labor of love in honor of JoAnn.

“My sister would be very proud,” Drewes said. “She would say we were going through a lot of fuss for her.”

The proceeds from the quilt auction will be used to start a historical preservation fund to continue her sister’s goal of preserving Western history.

“I’m not keeping this money,” Drewes said. “Whatever this sells for, we are using to start a Western historical preservation.”

Drewes said that is overdue, and she is optimistic about an opportunity to preserve the history of her community.

“Hopefully we can start doing some preserving history in Western,” she said.