

FOLLOWING  
THE BARN  
QUILT TRAIL

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Foreword by  
Donna Sue Groves

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# introduction

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I stumbled across my first barn quilt in 2008, while on a cross-country camping trip from my home in Stone Mountain, Georgia, to Yellowstone National Park. For decades, I had wanted to make the trip west, but the imagined journey had always included a traveling partner, preferably a husband. Some women judge men by how much money they earn or whether they would make good fathers. Instead I asked myself, *Would you go to Yellowstone with him?* Unfortunately, the few for whom the answer was yes had not become lasting fixtures in my life, and I neared the age of fifty as a single woman. By then making the journey was more important than being part of a shared experience, and my mostly Labrador mutt, Gracie, became my companion for the two-week trip.

Other than an aversion to children, who were deterred from entering our campsite by her impressive bark, Gracie was game for anything. Being the sole human on the journey meant that I got to dictate our schedule of activities, though I did have to apologize occasionally: “You’re going to have to wait in the car,” when stopping into a store for groceries. Of course, I always left the air conditioner running, and Gracie held up her end by looking menacing enough that no one tried to drive away with her. The photo album that chronicled the trip could be called, “Gracie Goes West,” with shots of Gracie swimming in a Kentucky lake; Gracie tracking prairie dogs; Gracie chasing a tumbleweed; Gracie on top of a picnic table to avoid campfire smoke; and of course, Gracie at Yellowstone.

Solo travel has never been lonely for me. My gregarious nature has led to many shared experiences with strangers: comparing notes as to sites seen and worth seeing, lingering until I care to depart, shifting plans to accommodate temporary friendships. When I spotted my first barn quilt, a brightly colored Flying Geese quilt block hanging on a barn in Cadiz, Kentucky, I was glad that no companion’s urge to reach our destination on time overrode my desire to stop and inquire. Barn owner Belenda Holland not only told me about her barn quilt but also shared her knowledge of the quilt trail in the area and its role in recognizing the quilting art of generations of farm women. The hour that we spent talking, that chance encounter, ignited my desire to know more, to talk to as many barn owners as I could, to discover the stories behind all of those quilt blocks. My need to know eventually led to quilt trail founder Donna Sue Groves in Adams County, Ohio.



### Gracie on the quilt trail

Over the course of several weeks, Donna Sue shared her story and provided me with all of the information she had compiled and contacts she had made. Armed with just enough knowledge to compel me to do so, I spent two years traveling the country, from New York to Colorado, Texas to Wisconsin, gathering the stories of those quilts. I practiced the art of careful listening as I was escorted through barns and learned of their construction and of the ancestors who had built them. I was welcomed into farmhouses where I heard stories of the quilters whose work was captured in paint and of the precious loved ones memorialized there. Some quilt blocks belonged to folks who either no longer farmed, or never had, but their stories were just as profound and worth sharing.

My faithful companion, Gracie, traveled the quilt trail with me much of the time, minding her manners in the backseat when a local quilt trail committee member rode along and learning the hard way to avoid the hooves of the horses and cows we met along the way. My considerable library of barn quilt photos included quite a number of “Gracie with a quilt block” shots, and each takes me back to a moment of our journey.

In 2010, with both my travels and my manuscript complete, a void opened up where barn quilt chasing had been. I took up kayaking, the quintessential solo sport

that combined a Florida girl's love of water with a practice that mirrors my preferred mode of travel. In my own boat, I can paddle along chatting and joking with others, or choose to break off and make my way at a quiet distance. On a weeklong adventure in June 2011, I met Glen Smith, a software developer who set his own work hours; for him that meant beginning early in the morning and kayaking on his own most afternoons. As a high-school teacher on summer break I was free to spend every day on the water, and having a partner with whom to share the work of boat transport led to weeks of carefree enjoyment on the Chattahoochee River.

Glen was quiet and shy, with a silvery gray braid that hung to the middle of his back, the opposite of what I considered my type. My certainty that we would never be an item allowed an easy friendship to develop. Our conversations happened in snippets, in shared observations when we brought our kayaks close enough for us to speak. Glen patiently coached me as I approached each riffle in the water and rescued me without complaint when I capsized despite his best efforts. I grew braver and stronger under Glen's strong and steady guidance. My kayaking buddy became my best friend.

One August afternoon, as we loaded boats into the bed of his truck, Glen asked, "May I take you to supper?" The earnest hope in his blue-gray eyes overwhelmed my doubts. Romance blossomed over schnitzel and beer at a German restaurant, not the standard first date but just right for two rather quirky souls. Holding hands during a twilight walk through the nearby Civil War cemetery, we took turns reading the epitaphs aloud. With the veil of friendship lifted, love grew quickly. Perhaps it had been there all along just waiting to be revealed.

By the time *Barn Quilts and the American Quilt Trail Movement* was published in 2012, Glen and I had been living together for a couple of months. I found myself enjoying a shared life for the first time. I relished cooking for two and scoured my cookbooks for recipes, creating a profile of shared favorites. We were very different; I tended towards noise and chaos, while Glen was steady and reasoned. I struggled to remember to make decisions as a team and forced myself to relax and let Glen decide how certain things ought to be done. I still preferred my own method of folding towels but had grown to appreciate the merits of filling the car's gas tank before the warning light glowed.

I began receiving requests to speak to quilt guilds and civic groups about the quilt trail and welcomed the opportunity to do so. Glen often accompanied me on my talks, and soon he was as well versed in barn quilts as I was; we often joked that if I were sick, he could deliver my presentation from memory, though perhaps without my flair. Glen has competed with the quilt trail for my attention quite a bit along the way but has never complained. If he only knew what he was getting himself into.